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HELD IN THRALL.

BY

BRACEBRIDGE HEMYNG,

AUTHOR OF "THE GAMBLER'S LAST THROW," "SECRETS OF THE TURF,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

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HELD IN THRALL.

CHAPTER I.

JEALOUSY.

A FEW years ago, one of the magnates of a county, which we will call Midlandshire, was Lord Cariston, an elderly, crotchety man; fond of his wife, fond of his only son, and a staunch supporter of Church and State.

His ancestral domain was called Hartshill, and he lived at Hartshill Castle.

The Honourable Ashley Leigh, who was his only child, held a captain's commission in the army, and was deservedly popular with all who knew him.

Lord Cariston was tall, thin, and of ascetic appearance, much given to reading sermons and religious literature generally. His hair was gray, rather with thought than age.

He was not talkative, always priding himself upon his reserve, and weighing carefully all that he said, saying that he should have to give an account of every idle word.

Mr. Ashley Leigh was the direct opposite of his father.

Tall, handsome, with short, curly black hair, gracefully brushed back from his forehead; always carefully dressed, though he never wore anything vulgar or ostentatious, his manner was at once cheerful and winning.

He was the idol of his mother, who regarded him as the support and consolation of her old age.

He had been with his regiment in Ireland for some months, and, as he expected to be ordered to Canada in the spring, he applied for and obtained leave of absence, intending to spend the festive season of Christmas with his parents at Hartshill Castle.

He had an additional object in wishing to return to Midlandshire.

An old house, delightfully situated at the foot of a hill, which protected it from the chilling blasts of the east and north winds, belonged to Lord Cariston, and was let by him to an old friend named Ingledew.

Built in the Elizabethan style, fitted with old-fashioned, quaint furniture, it exactly suited a gentleman who had been all his life engaged in antiquarian research.

When Mr. Ingledew, a widower, having but a moderate income, settled down near his old college friend, Lord Cariston, at Heart's Content, he hoped that the remaining portion of his life would glide peacefully away. Like the Lord of Hartshill, he had but one child, a daughter.

Marian Ingledew was very lovely, though she belonged to that impulsive, baby-faced, fair-haired class of women, who cannot be said to resemble any distinct, well-recognised type of beauty.

Her features were neither Grecian nor Roman, but the expression which lighted up her round, rosy, good-tempered countenance was winning in the extreme.

Marian had a governess who presented a striking contrast to her.

Mona Seafield was of the middle height, dark as the night, with black flashing eyes, whose liquid depths seemed to be the repositories of more than one secret. Her features were regular, and her expression cold and repellent; at times she was so stern that she seemed cut out of marble. There was no warmth in her manner, nothing friendly in the grasp of her limp, moist hand. In a word, she was to all both distant and severe. The colour she most affected in dress was black, and it became her well.

To those with whom she sojourned, and who did not know her well, Miss Seafield was an enigma, which it was hopeless to attempt to solve.

But beneath that icy surface there burned the fierce fire of ambition.

To raise herself above the necessity of working—for work with her was a necessity, her parents being very poor, though of genteel extraction—and to compel others to render her the homage due to rank and wealth, Mona would have sold herself to the powers of darkness.

At Heart's Content she lived a quiet, uneventful, unsatisfactory life.

Her pupil was gentle and compliant; never contradicting her, and diligently learning that which she had engaged to teach her.

Marian Ingledeew and the Honourable Ashley Leigh had grown up together as playfellows and sweethearts.

The intimacy of their childhood had ripened into love.

It was with a terrible sorrow at heart, that Mona Seafield beheld the growth of their attachment, for she had flattered herself that she could win the affections of the handsome officer, and make herself the admired mistress of Hartshill Castle.

Lord Cariston could not live many years; and at his death—if she could succeed in marrying his son—she would accomplish the object of her ambition, and be the proud possessor of a coronet.

It was the beginning of December.

The country was attired in its winter garb, though no snow had as yet fallen. Cold winds checked vegetation, and sharp frosts had denuded the most hardy trees of their leaves.

Heart's Content was surrounded with shrubberies, filled with evergreens, and its walls were here and there covered with ivy, which saved it from that abomination of desolation which an ordinary plain brick building would have presented.

One morning after breakfast, Marian Ingledeew was engaged in feeding the robins, which always came to the dining-room window to receive this mark of attention from the fair hands of their mistress.

She wore an abstracted air, and Mona Seafield had to speak twice before she arrested her attention.

'So Mr. Leigh has arrived at the castle, dear?' she said.

'Yes,' answered Marian, with a start; 'he came back from Ireland yesterday, his note informs me, and we may expect him to-day.'

'In that case, I suppose I must not be very exacting,' said Miss Seafield, with a forced smile. 'We will put Verdi and Goëthe on one side till the afternoon, or to-morrow. I can see you wish to be alone and quiet, in anticipation of his visit.'

'Oh, Mona,' cried the young girl, throwing her arms affectionately round the neck of her governess, 'you are so kind, so thoughtful. I have no secrets from you. I have told you how I love him, and how dearly, I have every reason to believe, he loves me. It is such pleasure to see him again after a long absence, which but precedes one longer still.'

‘Longer still?’ repeated Mona, with an inquiring glance.

‘Yes; the regiment is under orders for Canada in the spring.’

‘Indeed! that is news I did not expect.’

‘You?’ said Marian, rather sharply, resuming her position by the window. ‘In what way can Mr. Leigh’s movements possibly interest you?’

‘Only as your friend, my dear child,’ answered the governess, with hypocritical calmness.

Marian again became absent, and renewed the attention she had been paying the robins.

Miss Seafield reminded her pupil that she might look upon the day as her own, and retired to her room, which, being fond of privacy and seclusion, was a favourite retreat with her.

In truth she wanted an interval of rest as much as did Marian.

Her evil passions were surging high in her heart; her tempestuous nature was threatening to burst through her outside calm.

The Honourable Ashley Leigh would, she feared, offer his hand to Miss Ingledeu, and then, adieu to all her dreams of ambition and aggrandisement.

It was to think how she could frustrate this dire calamity that she wished to be alone.

When she compared her appearance with that of her pupil, she decided that she was infinitely more worthy of a man’s attention.

‘I am superior to her in all,’ she murmured. ‘Is it because I am a dependant that he shows me scant courtesy, and never breathes a word of love.’

Had it not been for a latent hope that Mr. Leigh would some day become conscious of her charms, the ambitious governess would not, for several years, have borne the unvarying monotony of Heart’s Content.

To teach others is always a disagreeable, and frequently a thankless task, but when the one who teaches hates the one who learns it becomes repulsive to the last degree.

While in her chamber, which overlooked the drive leading to Heart’s Content, Mona Seafield heard the sound of carriage wheels grating upon the gravel.

She was brushing her long, glossy, black hair, which hung in wavy masses over her neck and shoulders. Hastily

arranging it, she looked out of the window, and beheld the handsome form of the young soldier, who was in the act of throwing the reins to his groom, previous to alighting.

Some one else had seen him, too.

Marian Ingledeew had been on the watch.

She hastened to meet him, saying, as he shook her hand warmly—

‘How kind of you to come over to Heart’s Content, so soon after your arrival.’

‘Where had I a better right to pay a first visit?’ asked the young man, smiling.

In the drawing-room they saw Mr. Ingledeew, who was examining, through a microscope, a peculiarly-shaped bone, which one of his labourers had dug up.

‘Ah! my young friend,’ he said, extending his hand, but not quitting the table, which stood before the window. ‘Glad to see you back again. Poor Marian has been fretting dreadfully at your absence.’

‘Oh, papa!’ ejaculated Marian, pouting her rosy lips.

‘Do you deny it?’ asked her father.

‘What have you there, sir?’ asked Ashley Leigh, hastening to relieve Marian of the embarrassment which her heightened colour showed him she was feeling. ‘Something curious or rare, I imagine?’

‘I scarcely know what it is as yet,’ replied Mr. Ingledeew. ‘The formation is so very peculiar. It was found by one of my men, near the abbey, and I am strongly inclined to regard it as the *os femoris*, or thigh-bone, of an ancient Briton.’

For fully a quarter of an hour Mr. Ingledeew continued to talk to the young man, having started upon his favourite hobby.

When he could, however, without offending him, break away, he did so, and rejoined Marian, who, on this occasion, took little interest in the remarks of the antiquary.

‘I buried an old pony, close to the spot your father speaks of, years ago,’ said Ashley Leigh, in a low tone, to Marian, ‘and I verily believe they have dug up the bones.’

‘Surely, he would know the difference between human and animal remains,’ replied Marian, smiling, however, in spite of herself.

Withdrawing into an embrasure of the window, the lovers talked without interruption.

‘I bring you an invitation to spend Christmas at the castle,’ said Ashley Leigh; ‘you will not refuse it, for my sake, I know.’

Marian murmured her thanks.

Noticing an expression of sadness which suddenly overcast her features, he earnestly inquired the cause.

‘You are going away so soon,’ she replied. ‘It seems so hard to lose you.’

‘My darling,’ he said, in a fond voice, ‘you have given me the opportunity I have been longing for. If you love me as I love you, we will never be separated again. Wherever I go you shall accompany me. Be mine, dearest. Say but the little word which will make you mine, and we need never part again.’

Her head fell upon his shoulder, and she uttered a few words, which were scarcely intelligible, but which her lover construed into an acceptance of his suit. His lips sought hers, and he implanted a burning kiss to seal the compact.

At this moment a noise as if of the rustling of a dress was heard, and starting to an upright position, once more Marian beheld Mona Seafield.

The governess had been watching the lovers for some time, having entered the room unperceived.

She could not bear to see this happiness, and an involuntary movement had betrayed her presence. Marian just caught a glimpse of her face before she had time to alter its expression.

It haunted her for a long—long time afterwards; so fierce, so cruel, so relentless, so revolting was it.

The next moment Mona was smilingly shaking hands with the Honourable Ashley Leigh, talking like a woman of the world, about Ireland and other places, and asking him a multitude of everyday questions about commonplace things.

No trace of the implacable hatred which had rested upon her face remained.

Marian began to think she must have been mistaken.

Mr. Leigh stayed to lunch, and extracted a promise from Mr. Ingledeu, that he would accept Lord and Lady Cariston’s invitation, and spend Christmas at the castle.

He also ceremoniously extended the invitation to Miss Seafield, without whom he thought Marian would, perhaps, be lonely.

When taking leave of Marian, he remarked to her—

‘What a charming, well-informed woman Miss Seafield is! Quite a treasure to you, of course, although you are old enough and sufficiently accomplished to do without a governess.’

‘Yes,’ replied Marian, ‘she is more of a companion than anything else; but, agreeable as she can make herself, I fear her at times.’

‘Fear her,’ echoed Ashley Leigh, with a laugh; ‘she seems the gentlest of her sex.’

‘Ah! you do not know her as I do. You have not seen—but no matter. She is scarcely worth a difference of opinion between you and I, dear Ashley.’

Marian spoke with some bitterness, for the tone of eulogy which her affianced lover had adopted in speaking of the governess had grated harshly on her ears.

‘I meant no harm, my pet,’ said Mr. Leigh.

‘Do not excuse yourself or I shall think you do,’ answered Marian, glad of an opportunity to employ that tyranny which most newly-engaged girls like to show to their lovers.

Ashley Leigh avoided the subject, talked about something else, and was quickly driving home.

While Marian lingered in the porch, a boy came up to her and said—

‘If you please, miss, I was sent by Daddy Chiverton to say as how his missus was took worse, and would you come and see her.’

‘Very well—I will attend to it,’ answered Miss Ingledeu, giving the boy a gratuity.

She was not then in a mood to minister to her sick poor, though she was of a charitable disposition, and had acquired an excellent character in the neighbourhood for visiting them in their homes, and supplying them with religious instruction, good advice, and creature comforts.

Mrs. Chiverton was an old woman, the wife of a farm labourer, who had been ill for some time.

Mona Seafield knew this, as she had accompanied Marian to the cottage.

Seeking the governess, Marian said—

‘Will you oblige me by packing up a few things and taking them to the Chivertons’ cottage? I have just received a message to say that the poor old woman is worse.’

‘Will you not go yourself?’ asked Mona.

‘No, not now, my—my head aches,’ answered Marian, inventing an excuse.

Mona smiled inwardly and promised compliance.

She began to make her preparations slowly, but suddenly hurried her movements.

An idea had occurred to her.

‘This is inspiration,’ she muttered, ‘all may yet be retrieved. Wealth, position, rank, even Hartshill Castle may be mine.’

Hastily attiring herself, she set out on her journey, with a basket on her arm, and took the way which led to Daddy Chiverton’s cottage.

CHAPTER II.

THE PLOT.

DADDY CHIVERTON was a bad character.

The truth must be told, and we must admit that he would not work if he could help it: was fonder of the public-house parlour than his own fireside; and had, more than once, been convicted for poaching.

His wife was one of those poor, weak, silly women, who from the hour of their birth to that of their death never dream of having a will of their own.

She was always dependent upon some one. First of all she clung to her mother, and then her husband, who ruled her with a rod of iron, claimed her obedience and her services.

Their son was just the sort of young man who could be expected of such parents.

He was not altogether without his share of good looks, and was what is called clever.

But he was idle, dissolute, and worthless.

The keepers on Lord Cariston's estate strongly suspected him of following in his father's footsteps, and in truth he brought many a hare, pheasant, and rabbit into his mother's kitchen.

As yet he had not been caught.

Lady Cariston often gave the Chivertons presents of money and food.

In doing this she was actuated by a recollection that Mary Chiverton had nursed her son, the Honourable Ashley Leigh, and, consequently, that he and Darby Chiverton were foster-brothers.

When Miss Seafield arrived at the cottage, she saw smoke curling up through the trees, with which it was surrounded.

The thatch had grown thin in places, but Daddy Chiverton would never bestow an hour or two's work to mending it.

Old rags were stuffed into broken window panes, holes in the ground in front of the cottage, which had been made by

the pigs and fowls, were, for want of filling up, receptacles for muddy water, and she had to step carefully to avoid wetting her feet. Tapping at the door with her knuckles, she lifted the latch and walked in.

The son, Darby, was out; engaged, perhaps, in some predatory excursion.

Mary, the old woman, who was so seriously ill, was in a bed, which had been let into an alcove in the wall. Sitting by the fire was her husband, smoking a short pipe, and resting his elbows on his knees and his head on his hands.

Mona placed her basket on the table and proceeded to unpack it, saying as she did so—

‘Miss Ingledew has sent you a few little things which she thought would be acceptable to your wife. She would have come herself had she felt well enough.’

The old woman mumbled her thanks, and Daddy Chiverton, dusting a dilapidated chair with his hand, offered it to his visitor.

‘Do you find yourself better, my good woman?’ asked Mona, approaching the bedside.

‘No, miss, thank you. I’m much worse; I’ve no strength. The doctor says the cold weather that’s coming on will kill me. My cough’s so bad.’

As if to prove the truth of this assertion she began to cough violently. Suffocation seemed imminent; but when the fit was over, she fell back upon the pillow exhausted, breathing hoarsely.

Mona gave her a little jelly and some weak port wine and water, which did her a little good.

Soon afterwards her eyes closed and she fell asleep. Taking the chair Daddy Chiverton had offered her, Mona placed it near the wood fire which burned in the grate, and sat down.

The old man was about to withdraw his chair from the chimney corner, as a mark of respect, when Mona prevented him.

‘Stay where you are,’ she said, with the air and voice of one who knew how to command. ‘I wish to speak to you.’

Chiverton fancied that he was about to have a lecture about his wicked ways, the wretched, worthless life he led, and the evil example he set his son. Deprecating this infliction, he said—

‘I know I’m a hardened old sinner, miss. But it’s no kind

of use talking to me. As I have lived I shall die. Better let me be. I don't want to say anything rude. You're kind to my missus, and heaven knows the poor old soul wants it badly.'

'You mistake me,' said Mona, impatiently. 'I have not come to talk in that way.'

At this declaration Daddy Chiverton let his pipe fall from his mouth in great surprise, and it was broken into small pieces on the hearth.

'I repeat, I want to talk to you,' continued Mona. 'Listen to me, and answer my questions without any roundabout fuss.'

'Yes, miss,' replied Daddy, with alacrity.

'Your wife, I believe, nursed the Honourable Ashley Leigh?'

'Lord and Lady Cariston's son. She did.'

'In that case they are foster-brothers.'

'Just so, miss,' answered Daddy Chiverton, looking curiously at her out of the corner of his eyes, and wondering what she meant.

'I had a dream last night,' Mona went on, in a low voice, gazing at the fire, and talking slowly, as if to herself. 'I thought that you and your wife laid a plot, which might be of service to you in your old age. When the peer's son was brought to you, he was very much like your own boy, and you determined to change the children. That is to say, when the boy went back to the castle, it was your son and not Lady Cariston's baby.'

Daddy Chiverton drew a long breath.

'It might have been done,' he said. 'It's a pity it wasn't.'

'I tell you it was done!' replied Mona, sharply.

'Was!'

'Attend to me. I have not concluded my dream yet. It appeared to me, in my sleep, that your wife's conscience pricked her on her death-bed, and she could not die without rendering justice to the boy whom she had kept out of his inheritance. Accordingly, when at the point of death, she sent for a clergyman and made a confession. He, in his turn, sent for two justices of the peace, who attested it.'

She paused a moment.

'Yes, miss, yes,' replied Daddy Chiverton, trembling with excitement, and bending forward to catch every word she let fall.

‘When the news was brought to Lady Cariston,’ resumed Mona, ‘she refused to credit the story, but Lord Cariston, who is an extremely conscientious man, believed it implicitly and determined to do justice. The rightful heir was introduced to every one, and from a peasant’s son, Darby became the presumptive owner of Hartshill Castle, and the broad acres attached to it.’

‘And of course he took care of his poor old father, who never wanted for anything,’ said Chiverton, finishing the story after his own selfish fashion.

‘You seem to recollect the circumstances now,’ said Mona, fixing her searching eyes upon him.

‘The changing of the children!’ replied Daddy Chiverton. ‘Of course I do, miss. It’s all as plain as daylight. Mr. Ashley Leigh is my real son, and Darby Chiverton is the only child of Lord and Lady Cariston.’

‘That is it exactly,’ replied Mona, with a satisfied smile.

A restless movement in the bed showed that Mary Chiverton was awaking.

‘Go to your wife. Talk this matter over,’ said Miss Seafield. ‘I will wait here, for I must see your son before I go.’

‘He will be back soon,’ answered Daddy. ‘He’s only gone to visit the snares. You see we’re so poor, miss, that a rabbit or a brace of birds——’

‘Don’t stand there, whining and snivelling about being poor to me!’ cried Mona, impatiently. ‘Have I not told you how to obtain money?’

‘I beg your pardon, miss. It’s a way I’ve got. Years of poverty and——’

‘Go and talk to your wife,’ interrupted Mona, with a decided air.

He went to the bedside and talked for a long time earnestly to his better-half, who, though weak and ill, and near death’s door, still had the possession of her faculties.

As we have said, she knew no will but her husband’s.

After a while Daddy Chiverton came to Miss Seafield and said—

‘If you please, she wants to see you.’

Going to the sick woman, Mona said, leaning over the bed—

‘Has your husband told you what you ought to do?’

‘Yes, but I’m not quite clear about it. My head’s weak. Will you talk to me?’

Mona went over the ground again, and concluded by saying—

‘It is only an act of justice which you ought—which you must do. You know yourself that you cannot live; and by following my advice, you will make your husband and your son independent of the world.’

‘What are you to get for all this?’ asked the woman, pointedly.

‘That is my business,’ answered Mona, drily.

‘Have you got her promise?’ said Daddy Chiverton, gruffly. ‘She’d better make it, if she doesn’t want to die with my curse ringing in her ears.’

‘Oh, David!’ cried the poor woman; ‘I’ll promise, I’ll do anything you wish. I never did disobey you yet. I’ll do it. Only tell me what I am to do. Don’t curse me. Don’t, don’t. I couldn’t bear it.’

Daddy Chiverton smiled grimly.

Mona talked to the woman for some minutes, in a clear but low voice.

She was giving her her lesson.

Just as she had concluded the door was thrown violently open, and Darby entered, with his pockets stuffed full of game.

He drew back on seeing Miss Seafield.

‘Take your hat off, you cub,’ said his father. ‘Don’t you see there is a lady here.’

‘Fine folks don’t keep us,’ growled the promising youth.

‘You always was a bad one, Darby,’ replied his father. ‘It’s a crying shame I did not leather you more when you was young.’

‘Come here, if you please,’ said Mona, wishing to put a stop to the storm which was brewing between father and son. ‘I want to have a little conversation with you.’

‘With me?’

‘Yes, with you. Take this chair.’

He obeyed, awkwardly enough. He would have refused if he could; but there was that in Mona’s manner which constrained him to comply with her request.

In about ten minutes she had made him thoroughly acquainted with the details of her daring scheme.

'Now,' she added, 'it depends entirely upon you whether you will continue in the sort of life you are leading, or whether you will be a gentleman and acquire a position.'

It was very tempting to Darby Chiverton.

'I should like to be a fine gentleman,' he said; 'why should I not?'

'Why, indeed?'

'One man is as good as another. It's only education and mixing with a different set that has made Mr. Ashley Leigh what he is. I can shoot as well and ride as well as he can.'

'You consent?' she demanded, a little nervously.

'I do,' he answered.

'Very well. Now tell me how long it will take you to go into the town?'

The town was called Stanton, distant about two miles.

'And back again?' he queried.

'Of course.'

'About an hour.'

'Go, if you please, to the stationer's and buy a bill stamp. I will write down the amount I want it for.'

'What for?'

'You will see on your return.'

With some difficulty a bottle of muddy ink was found and an indifferent pen.

With these she wrote something on a piece of dirty paper; and giving Darby some money, saw him start on his errand.

'Be cautious,' she said in an admonitory whisper; 'say nothing to anybody. Keep your own counsel always.'

He nodded, and was gone.

The time passed wearily until he came back. Neither Mona or Daddy Chiverton were in the humour for conversation.

The silence was only broken by the howling of the wind outside, the crackling of the logs on the fire, and the hacking cough of the poor woman who was lying in the bed.

When Darby returned he drew a paper from his pocket, and handed it to Miss Seafield, who said—

'Did you bring the scrap on which I wrote what I wanted?'

He shook his head.

'That was a mistake; but it does not much matter. If we are clever, no one will take the trouble to rake up evidence against us. Can you write?'

Darby answered in the affirmative.

Miss Seafield told him what to put on the paper and where to sign his name. He did all she ordered him. When the document was made a legal obligation to pay a certain sum, she held it to the fire to dry, and said :

“By this promissory note you undertake to give me, in three months, the sum of five thousand pounds. If we are successful, of course you can do it without any difficulty. If not, it will be so much waste paper, and you need not trouble yourself about it.”

‘That is quite fair,’ answered Darby, looking at her handsome face and symmetrical figure with admiring eyes.

‘Now,’ she said, ‘I hope you quite understand what you have to do.’

‘Quite,’ answered father and son, in a breath ; then lowering her voice, she went on, pointing to the bed—

‘That poor creature cannot last long. To-night, perhaps, while she is sensible enough, it will be as well for you to send for Mr. Champneys, the clergyman, and let him receive her confession that the children were changed. Her motive is this : she feels she cannot die without doing justice to the real Mr. Leigh ; although by so acting she reduces her own son to comparative beggary.’

Then she rose to go.

Wrapping her plaid shawl closely around her, she prepared to retrace her steps to Heart’s Content.

‘If you were at all a lady’s man, Mr. Darby,’ she said, with a seductive smile, ‘you would offer to see me part of the way home.’

‘If I may make so bold?’

‘Of course you may.’

He emptied his poaching coat of the game its pockets contained, not caring now whether Miss Seafield saw what his occupation had been or not, and putting on his felt hat, accompanied her.

She took his arm, and a strange thrill ran through him.

Never before had he been so near to a well-dressed, handsome lady.

Often he had hung about the passage of the castle with the servants, catching a glimpse now and then of the gay crowd, when a ball or a party was given by the noble owners of Hartshill.

Often had he longed to make one of the fashionable throng,

and cursed the hard fate which condemned him to the life of a day labourer.

Mona felt him tremble, as her little hand rested upon the sleeve of his velveteen jacket, and from that moment she knew that she could do as she liked with him.

During this short walk to Heart's Content, she drew a vivid picture of the delights which awaited him, in the new sphere to which she was about to translate him, with a rapidity equal to that of a magician's wand.

She cautioned him, too, and advised him to act circumspectly, dinning over and over again into his ears the lesson she had given all of them in the cottage.

'You will find life much pleasanter,' she said; 'plenty of money, and all the luxuries which unlimited wealth can command, will bring you such happiness as you have never yet dreamed of. If you want beauty, you will find it at your feet. But perhaps you have some rustic sweetheart?'

Darby emphatically assured her that such was not the case.

He had always felt, he said, that he was destined to something better than his present lot, and consequently looked higher.

'Ah, well,' said Mona, with a sigh; 'we shall see you marrying some lady of rank.'

'No, indeed!' he answered, breathing heavily. 'If I dared—that is, if you would not be angry with me, I——'

'Here we are, close to Heart's Content!' said Mona, interrupting him. 'I must wish you good-bye. It will not be well for us to be seen together.'

Pressing his hand, she favoured him with another bewitching smile, and tripped lightly away, leaving him standing still, as if overwhelmed.

'The simpleton!' she murmured. 'He would have proposed to me on the spot. Not yet, I must see how the plot works, and what compensating advantages he can offer me for such a sacrifice. Ugh! the night makes one shudder.'

On entering the house, Mona tried to glide up to her bedroom unperceived, but she met Marian Ingledeu on the stairs.

'What a long time you have been!' she said.

'Yes, dear. I stayed to read the Bible to the poor old woman, who is very ill indeed: and after that I took a long walk. Is your headache better?'

'A little,' answered Marian drily, retiring to her chamber.

Miss Ingledeu did not like her governess that day so much as she had done formerly.

The Honourable Ashley Leigh had, she fancied, spoken admiringly of her, and she was slightly jealous.

CHAPTER III.

STRANGE NEWS.

WHILE Miss Seafield was dressing for dinner Marian put her head in at the door, and said—

‘I forgot to tell you, that Mr. Champneys and Doctor Hawkins are expected to-night.’

‘Thank you, dear!’ said Mona, in a quiet, condescending manner.

When she reached the drawing-room, she found Mr. Ingledew talking to his guests, who had arrived.

Miss Seafield was always treated by the master of Heart’s Content as one of the family.

‘It’s so dreadful for a governess to be made to feel her position,’ he would say, generously.

Mona was never in better spirits, she laughed and chatted gaily; being really a well-informed woman, and quite at her ease in the best society, she was a general favourite.

She could talk to Mr. Fleurus Champneys about the high church movement, just as well as she could discourse with Doctor Hawkins about the poor of the parish, and the latest discoveries in medicine.

It was Miss Ingledew’s custom to retire soon after the dessert was placed upon the table; to allow the gentlemen to sit over their wine, and talk politics.

She was about to do so, when a servant entered, saying that Doctor Hawkins was wanted at Daddy Chiverton’s cottage.

‘I’ll just run over,’ he said, ‘and come back again, though I don’t suppose I can do much good in that quarter. The old woman was sinking fast when I left her yesterday.’

He had scarcely got his great coat on, when another messenger came from the clergyman’s house, saying his presence was also required at Daddy Chiverton’s cottage. The wife was dying, and she wanted to see the parson before she passed away.

‘In that case, doctor, we can go together!’ said Mr. Champneys.

‘Certainly. Glad of your company!’ replied Mr. Hawkins.

For several hours Mr. Ingledew awaited their return; but as he did not see them, he, being an early man, went to bed, having given them up.

Our story now takes us to Hartshill Castle—a venerable pile, built in the early Norman style of architecture, and still preserving its distinguishing features, though it had been considerably altered and added to by the various Lords of Cariston.

As soon as breakfast was over, Lord Cariston was informed that the Rev. Fleurus Champneys wished to see him.

‘Wants my advice about a church-rate, or some parochial matter, I suppose!’ thought his lordship, as he told the domestic to show him into his study.

After the greeting was over, the clergyman said—

‘I have come upon very peculiar business, my lord. So peculiar, in fact, that I scarcely know how to begin my story.’

‘Indeed!’ said Lord Cariston, elevating his eyebrows.

‘I had better be circumstantial, I think.’

‘If you please.’

‘Last night I was dining with Mr. Ingledew at Heart’s Content. After dinner I was sent for by David Chiverton, whose wife was dying.’

‘Nothing very extraordinary about that,’ said Lord Cariston, with a smile. ‘She has been dying for the last two years.’

‘She is gone at last.’

‘Poor creature! Well, we must all die some day. Go on, Champneys.’

‘Before her death she made a confession, which I have in my pocket. I sent for two justices of the peace, in whose presence it was read over to the old woman, and duly attested. They were Sir Temple Irving and Mr. George Pottinger. Here is the document. If you will cast your eye over it, the matter will be more plain to you.’

‘To me? How can it possibly interest me?’ asked his lordship, fidgetting nervously in his pocket for his spectacles.

‘You will see.’

With these words Mr. Fleurus Champneys handed Lord Cariston a sheet of foolscap paper, on which was written about a dozen lines.

His lordship read it, at first with some carelessness, and afterwards with trembling eagerness.

He read it twice, as if fearful of having mistaken its import. Then laying it down on the table, and his spectacles on it, he said—

‘This is grave, very grave.’

Mr. Champneys quite concurred with him.

‘If this be the truth,’ he pointed to the confession, ‘it follows that I have been cherishing the wrong man. Is it not so? It is as clear as daylight that Ashley Leigh is a peasant’s son, and that Darby—isn’t that the name?’

‘It is.’

‘That Darby is really my child. That is the case—eh?’

‘Yes; in a nutshell.’

‘As you say, in a nutshell. Now, tell me, Champneys, are you my friend?’

‘I hope so, my lord.’

‘I know it. I have proved it, ever since I presented you with the living of Stanton. Now, tell me, have you any reason to doubt the truthfulness of this old woman’s dying confession?’

‘None whatever,’ answered Mr. Champneys. ‘I never heard anything more truthfully revealed. There was no flaw or discrepancy in her statement. What she advanced she adhered to strictly. She declared that she had changed the children, sending her own child to the castle, and keeping the one entrusted to her care to nurse. There were no distinguishing marks on either, so the fraud was easily perpetrated.’

Lord Cariston paced the room uneasily.

Stopping suddenly opposite the clergyman, he said—

‘I cannot help showing some emotion, Champneys, for I have got to love the boy. Ashley has twined himself around my heart. But I—advise me, old friend. Tell me what I ought to do.’

Mr. Fleurus Champneys reflected a moment.

‘You must do your duty,’ he said, at length.

‘And that is?’

‘Make reparation to your own flesh and blood for the wrong that has been done him.’

‘Yes, you are right,’ replied Lord Cariston. ‘I am sorry—very sorry for Ashley. I wonder, too, how my poor wife will take it. He is quite his mother’s boy. But you are right, Champneys. Justice must and shall be done. Will you break it to Ashley while I go and talk to Lady Cariston.’

Mr. Champneys proposed to do so, and the two men separated.

One went to seek Mr. Ashley Leigh, the other proceeded to the apartment of Lady Cariston.

Her ladyship was in her boudoir, which opened on to a conservatory, attached to which was an aviary. Lady Cariston's two hobbies were flowers and birds. She was engaged in picking the dead leaves from a geranium, when her husband's voice aroused her, saying—

‘Come here, my dear, for an instant; I must speak to you.’

It was seldom that Lord Cariston used such imperative language, and her ladyship obeyed the command in some trepidation.

‘How white you look!’ she exclaimed. ‘What has happened?’

‘Our son is not our son,’ he answered.

‘I cannot understand enigmas. You know that!’ she exclaimed. ‘Why keep me in suspense? Be explicit, for goodness sake.’

In a low voice Lord Cariston informed her of what had happened, and he ended by placing the confession in her hand.

She threw it angrily on one side, crying—

‘I won't read it. I don't believe a word of it. The thing has been got up by those people.’

‘How could such simple people as these cottagers get up such a plot;’ replied Lord Cariston. ‘No, my dear; unpalatable as it may be to us to do so, we must believe it. Justice must be done. We must have Darby, or Ashley, as he ought to be called, here. After Christmas we can engage a tutor for him, and send him abroad to be polished by foreign travel. Ashley we shall always treat as a dear friend, if not as a relative; but he must at once recognize the fact that my title can never be his, and that he is not the heir to Hartshill.’

‘That is your decision?’ said his wife.

‘My inviolable decision.’

A deep sob startled them.

Looking round they beheld Ashley, who had broken away from Mr. Champneys, on hearing the news, and had indignantly rushed to his father and mother, to demand the truth of the strange intelligence.

He heard the latter part of his father's speech, and the ‘inviolable decision’ had struck like a knell on his heart.

It was very hard to be dispossessed of title, home, and fortune at a single blow, for he was much too proud to stay in a place which did not belong to him, and be dependent on the bounty of those upon whom he had no claim.

‘My poor boy,’ said Lord Cariston, turning round and wringing his hand.

Recovering himself by a violent effort, Ashley exclaimed—
‘What am I to understand from what Mr. Champneys has told me? Is this wild, improbable story to be believed? Am I the son of a peasant?’

‘The proofs are incontestable,’ answered Lord Cariston.

‘Tell me all.’

Lord Cariston, as deliberately as possible, communicated the facts of the singular case as he knew them himself.

He assured Ashley that he would always retain his affection, and that the allowance he now received should be continued; while Hartshill Castle should ever be a home for him.

Ashley shook his head mournfully.

‘Is it possible that the ties of kindred are so weak, that you will act thus?’ asked Lady Cariston.

‘They are so strong that I am going to do a simple act of justice,’ was the reply.

Lord Cariston left the boudoir to rejoin Mr. Champneys, and concert the proper measures to be taken in the emergency.

The mother and son were left together.

Throwing her arms round his neck her ladyship exclaimed, with tears in her eyes—

‘I will never, never believe this strange story. Trust me, that I will unravel this mystery somehow.’

Ashley became calm and collected, and talked for a considerable time with his mother.

In the afternoon he packed up a few things in a bag, and left the castle without saying a word to any one.

Mr. Champneys had gone away in the morning, but he returned to dinner. His first question was—

‘Where is Mr. Ashley, or Mr. Darby Chiverton, as I suppose I ought to call him?’

‘If you mean my son, sir,’ replied Lady Cariston, coldly, ‘he has gone to town, at least he announced his intention of doing so this morning.’

‘Gone to London!’ ejaculated his lordship.

‘Certainly. The castle was no place for him after your decision this morning.’

‘Without saying a word to me!’

‘What had he to say?’

‘That is very odd!’ said Sir Temple Irving, who was one of the guests. ‘I could have declared that I saw Mr. Ashley Leigh talking to Thorne, the gatekeeper, as I passed the lodge. The light of my carriage-lamps shone full upon him.’

‘Impossible!’ said Lady Cariston, hastily.

‘So I apprehend, after your statement; but it was a singular illusion.’

The following day Lord Cariston sent word to Daddy Chiverton, that he would see him and his son in three days. He was not yet prepared for the interview, the intelligence had been so sudden that he required time to collect his thoughts, and decide upon the course of action to be pursued.

That was on Tuesday.

On Wednesday afternoon, news was received at the castle that the body of a young man, frightfully mutilated, had been found on the metals of a railway near London.

His linen was marked ‘A. L.’ There was some money found in his pocket, a cigar case, with a coronet and the initials ‘A. L.,’ and an envelope, addressed to the Honourable Ashley Leigh, Hartshill Castle, near Stanton, Midlandshire.

The face was so disfigured that it was impossible to recognise the features.

The conclusion arrived at by everybody was, that Ashley Leigh had been so overcome by the intelligence of his low birth, that he had committed suicide. Lady Cariston was silent, but calm. The shock appeared to affect her deeply, but did not show its effects much on the surface.

As for his lordship, he was grieved, and became doubly anxious to ‘do justice,’ as he called it, to Darby Chiverton.

After breakfast, on Thursday, Lord Cariston, who was momentarily expecting the arrival of Daddy Chiverton and Darby, sought his wife, to beg her to be present at the interview.

She was in her conservatory as usual. On the carpet of the boudoir her husband picked up a letter, which he ventured to read. It ran thus—

‘Your ladyship will perceive that I have carried out your instructions to the letter. I hope everything has been done to your satisfaction. I accept your invitation, and will

arrive at the castle, for Christmas, in a week from this date.

‘I am your ladyship’s faithful servant,

‘HAMLEY MORRIS.’

‘Dec. 12th, 18—’

Lady Cariston, hearing a noise, came out of her boudoir and flushed angrily at seeing her letter in her husband’s hand.

‘Who is your correspondent, my dear?’ he asked. ‘I do not know the name.’

‘Oh! perhaps not. He is a broker whom I have employed to transfer some stock which stands in my name. He is coming down for a week.’

‘So I perceive,’ answered his lordship, drily.

When she heard what he wanted her to do, she refused firmly.

‘I will receive him politely,’ she said, ‘If it be your determination to have him here, but I cannot recognise a peasant’s son as my own. My grief for poor Ashley makes me wish to be as secluded as possible.’

In vain Lord Cariston tried to persuade her.

‘I, too, am overwhelmed with grief,’ he said. ‘But the dreadful news requires confirmation.’

A servant announced the arrival of father and son, and Lord Cariston hurried away to receive them.

CHAPTER IV.

DOING JUSTICE.

LORD CARISTON, upon leaving his wife's boudoir proceeded to the library, where Daddy Chiverton and Darby were anxiously awaiting him.

The interview was a long one.

At the conclusion, Lord Cariston embraced Darby and invited him to come at once to take up his abode at the castle.

He offered a substantial cottage to the old man, which was thankfully refused.

'I like the old place, and I'll stick to it,' said Daddy, 'though a trifle of money, my lord, would be acceptable.'

'You shall have it,' answered Lord Cariston, going to a drawer, and cramming his hands full of sovereigns, without counting them.

Darby said he would come the next day; he wanted to buy some clothes and other things at Stanton, which he thought would become his newly-found grandeur.

The father and son left the castle highly satisfied with the result of their interview, and the generosity of Lord Cariston.

Darby was publicly recognised as the Honourable Darby Leigh. His Christian name he could not change.

Everything had been highly successful.

Much more so than they had expected.

Daddy Chiverton had anticipated being bought off at a price.

He had received a line from Mona, in the morning, telling him to meet her, at midnight, at the ruins of the abbey, a spot half-way between Heart's Content and his own cottage.

It was not safe for them to be seen together in the daytime.

After Mr. Ingledew, his daughter, and the servants, had retired to rest, she slipped out of the house unobserved, and bent her steps towards the abbey.

The ruins were well preserved, covered with ivy in places, and were considered most interesting relics of a bygone age.

It was a fine night, and the soft moonlight shone in streams through the grand old windows, and flooded the grass-grown courts.

Report said that the ground underneath was honeycombed with the vaults and subterranean passages made by the monks, who had lived there in days of yore.

Mona thought nothing of that, though she started when she came suddenly upon the person of Daddy Chiverton, who was standing in the shadow.

‘A fine night,’ he said, in a tone of familiarity, dropping the ‘miss,’ which he had always formerly used in addressing her.

She was about to reply, when the distant sound of the midnight hour, borne along the frosty air from a clock at Heart’s Content, fell upon their ears.

At the same time Daddy Chiverton uttered a cry.

It was an exclamation of alarm.

Following the direction of his staring eyes, Mona beheld a sight which froze the blood in her veins.

Some distance off, with his pallid face turned towards them, and passing from one portion of the ruins to the other, his figure well defined in the moonlight, was the well-known person of Ashley Leigh.

They had both heard of his death.

They both knew that they had, by their wicked ingenuity, hounded him on to the commission of the dreadful crime of suicide.

That it was an apparition, Daddy Chiverton did not doubt.

Mona, less credulous, dashed forward, but ere she reached the spot it was gone; although she searched about in every direction, not a single trace of a human being could she see.

Returning to Daddy Chiverton’s side, she sat down on a block of moss-covered stone, trembling in every limb like an aspen.

Her face was ghastly pale.

In a short time the conspirators recovered from the consternation into which this extraordinary supernatural appearance had thrown them.

But they conversed in whispers, as if they feared that shadowy, unsubstantial forms, floating in the air, might overhear the dread secrets of which they were the mutual recipients.

Daddy Chiverton informed Mona of all that had taken place, and of the success of the plot so far.

The governess impressed the necessity of caution upon him; and he, perfectly content to be guided by her, promised compliance with her instructions.

'I think I have nothing more to say at present,' said Mona. 'Of course, we must not be seen together; and if we have occasion to meet again, I will come to your cottage. This terrible collection of ruins frightens me, I know not why.'

'They do tell strange tales of the olden times about it,' answered Daddy Chiverton.

Mona shuddered involuntarily.

Taking leave of the old man, she hurried back to Heart's Content, and regained her chamber without any one perceiving her.

On the appointed day, Daddy Chiverton and his hopeful son Darby presented themselves at Hartshill Castle, and were shown into the drawing-room.

The footman who admitted them knew that Darby was to be received as the young master, but having known him as an idle, poaching, good-for-nothing fellow, glad to go on any errand for a pint of beer, he was not particularly civil, and did not say 'sir' when he answered him.

This enraged Darby, who had made up his mind to vindicate the false position he was placed in, and show them all, as he said, who was their master.

'Tell my father, Lord Cariston, that I am here,' he exclaimed, loudly; 'and don't let me have any of your insolence. You do not seem to know who you are speaking to.'

The footman was sorely tempted to retort, but his discretion over-ruled his inclination, and he bowed, as he went to announce the arrival of Mr. Darby Leigh, as he was in future to be called, with the prefix of 'honourable.'

Lord Cariston was quickly in attendance, and heartily welcomed the man he firmly believed to be his son, saying—

'You have come to the seat of your ancestors, and I trust you will live to add fresh lustre to the family name.'

'Where's my mother?' inquired Darby, abruptly.

'I will ring and ask,' rejoined Lord Cariston.

He did so, and was informed that she had driven over to Heart's Content.

'It does not seem to me that she is over and above anxious to see me,' remarked Darby.

‘You must make allowance, my dear boy,’ answered poor Lord Cariston. ‘She has a prejudice in favour of Ashley—rest his soul—who was so sadly snatched from us. If you act judiciously, you will in time, I have no doubt, overcome that prejudice, which, we must all admit, is very natural.’

‘I don’t like it,’ replied Darby, bluntly.

‘I sympathise with you. Still it is a matter which rests with time. Win her love. You are, I am sure, warm-hearted and affectionate; frequent opportunities of displaying your filial affection will occur—do not neglect them. A more estimable lady never lived, as you will admit, when you know her sterling worth as well as I do.’

‘It seems a cold reception,’ said Darby, shrugging his shoulders.

‘Everything is so sudden and unexpected,’ pleaded his lordship.

‘Never mind—you’re my father,’ answered Darby. ‘You’ve admitted it, haven’t you? and you can’t help that, old boy, can you?’

Lord Cariston shrank back at this vulgar speech; but he was always in favour of ‘making allowances’ for people, and he attributed it to Darby’s education and bringing up.

‘Ah, my lord,’ exclaimed Daddy Chiverton, affecting to weep, ‘you are much happier than I am. You have a son, while mine is found dead, just as I had discovered him. Oh, if I had only held him in my arms once! the separation then would not have seemed so hard.’

‘Poor old man!’ said Lord Cariston compassionately—‘yours is, indeed, a hard case!’

‘Well, I give you up the son I thought was mine. You’ll treat him kindly, my lord,’ Daddy went on. ‘Perhaps he mayn’t be all you would like. He’ll be strange to the ways of the fine folks he’s come amongst, but you won’t let him be put upon.’

‘Make your mind perfectly easy on that point. He shall receive every consideration.’

‘Don’t you fret, father as was, I can take my own part,’ said Darby, with a self-confident nod. ‘I’ve got my position, and I’ll make people respect me.’

‘That is right,’ said Lord Cariston, approvingly; ‘make people respect you. A very proper speech. Never forget the old adage—“Familiarity breeds contempt.” And now, as I

have some letters to write, you must excuse me. Mr. Chiverton, order what refreshment you like.'

'Thank you, my lord. I'll go below, and take a mug of beer, and a crust of bread and cheese. thank you.'

Darby turned away with ineffable disdain, saying—

'I shall have some champagne—that's the wine for nobles like me.'

'What, at this early hour of the morning! Of course you can do as you like; and if you wish to celebrate your arrival, why——'

'Leave me alone, father,' interrupted Darby. 'I know what I'm about. You never need bother yourself about me. I wasn't born yesterday.'

'Do as you like; but be prudent. Every one will be ready to criticise your conduct at first, and it depends upon yourself entirely whether you make a favourable impression or not. I have nothing more to say. If you want me, I shall be in my study. This house is your home.'

Lord Criston shook the old cottager by the hand, and went away, whereupon Darby rang the bell, and threw himself into an arm-chair.

'Bring some champagne,' he said, when the servant appeared; 'and mind it's good. No half-and-half stuff for me, and tell the keeper to come round with dogs and guns. I shall shoot to-day.'

The wine was brought and opened. Darby indulged rather freely, but Daddy Chiverton would not touch the sparkling champagne, fearing, as he said, that it might get into his head, and let out some things he had got shut up there securely.

He went downstairs, and had a modest lunch of bread and cheese and ale, and then betook himself to his cottage.

Liking the wine, Darby emptied the bottle and part of another. As may be imagined, it took an effect upon him, unaccustomed as he was to its potent influence; so when he was told that the keeper had arrived, he walked with an unsteady gait to the front door.

There were several statues on the lawn, which was tastefully laid out; Darby, full of a newborn spirit of destruction, took a gun from the keeper, and blew off the head of a winged Cupid, shattering the arm of a Mercury with the other barrel.

The keeper dared not interfere, and said nothing. Darby grew confused and dizzy. He lost his equilibrium, and while

trying to reload the gun, having put the shot in first, and the powder on the top of it, he fell back on the grass, and went sound asleep.

The keeper called the servants, who indulged in many a joke at the expense of their new master, who, luckily for them, was unconscious of their pleasantries.

Not knowing what else to do with him, they carried him upstairs, and laid him on a bed.

Thus did he celebrate his arrival, and assume the position of heir of Hartshill Castle and the vast estates belonging to it.

We must follow Lady Cariston to Heart's Content, where she found Marian Ingledeu in tears.

Ever since the terrible and distressing news of Ashley Leigh's death, she had given way to the most violent grief.

Her sorrow was not loud or obtrusive, but it was none the less strong and acute.

Those who suffer silently suffer most.

She welcomed Lady Cariston as a mother, and threw herself, weeping, into her arms.

Mona sat in one corner of the deep bay-window, apparently engaged in embroidery work.

'My dear, dear child,' said her ladyship, 'you must not give way like this—indeed you must not.'

'Oh, Lady Cariston,' answered Marian Ingledeu, weeping, 'I do not mind confessing to you, now that he is gone, that I did love him far, far beyond all created things. It is so hard to lose him. My heart will break. I am sure it will.'

'Let me comfort you, Marian. I think I can, if you will endeavour to be more composed,' replied her ladyship.

'You are very good. So often have I experienced your kindness that I am persuaded of that; but you cannot heal my wounded spirit,' said Marian, with a melancholy shake of the head.

'Is that Miss Seafield?' asked Lady Cariston, looking in the direction of the window.

'Yes; Mona has been so kind to me.'

'Can we be by ourselves?—what I have to say to you, I wish to say alone.'

'Certainly, but Mona——'

'Allow me to have my own way, dear,' said her ladyship, with a smile. 'I know Miss Seafield's worth, still it is my whim to speak to you alone.'

‘Do you mind leaving me with Lady Cariston?’ said Marian, to the governess.

‘Not in the least. I was not aware I was intruding upon your privacy,’ answered Mona, rising and gathering her work together, prior to leaving the room, which she almost immediately did.

Mona went out on the lawn, and sitting upon a rustic-chair near the window, braved the chilly air, in the vain attempt to hear what passed in the drawing-room.

Lady Cariston and Marian were alone together for more than half-an-hour.

What passed between them was impossible for the scheming governess to guess.

When her ladyship came out to her carriage, she was accompanied by Marian, who was smiling through her tears.

‘You will not forget your promise to come and stay with me, at the castle, for a week, at Christmas?’ said Lady Cariston.

‘No; many thanks,’ answered Marian. ‘I will certainly come. Once more let me assure you of my gratitude for this visit.’

‘Remember!’ said her ladyship, as she entered her carriage, and was driven off.

Marian inclined her pretty head, and Mona worried herself to think if the word, ‘Remember,’ which appeared to be spoken in an admonitory tone, had reference to the invitation to the castle, or to the secret conversation which had taken place between them in the drawing-room.

It was wonderful to notice the change in Marian’s demeanour.

She was sad and thoughtful, it is true, but the heart-breaking sorrow she had previously indulged in had utterly vanished.

Mona was not slow to remark this, but she made no comment upon the sudden alteration. It was not her custom to ask questions.

When Lady Cariston returned to the castle, she at once noticed the ruthless destruction which had been committed amongst the statuary.

Her face grew red, and she asked a servant what the cause of it was.

Lady Cariston was soon in possession of the history of the affair, and burned with indignation to think that this low impostor, as she persisted in calling Darby, should dare to take such a liberty on his first arrival at her house.

Seeking her husband, she made a complaint to him, but he, as usual, endeavoured to excuse the outrage.

‘It is monstrous,’ she said. ‘Will you allow such a thing to pass without expressing your disapproval of it? Is Harts-hill to be turned into a bear garden?’

‘Remonstrate with him yourself, my dear. I am afraid he is a little too headstrong for me,’ answered Lord Cariston. ‘You will, if you use kindness, acquire a beneficial influence over him.’

‘The kindness I should use would be to send him back to his cottage,’ replied her ladyship, leaving the study of her husband in anything but an enviable frame of mind.

Darby was not visible until dinner-time, when he appeared in a shooting-coat and a spotted neckerchief, looking rather penitent.

At all times, whether alone or not, Lord and Lady Cariston were very particular about evening dress, and when Darby appeared in morning costume, his lordship was constrained to say—

‘You will I am sure excuse my remark, but it is always our custom to dress for dinner. Will you think of this when you visit Stanton, and procure what is necessary?’

‘I’ll try to think of it,’ answered Darby, gruffly. ‘This is good enough I should fancy, when there is no company.’

‘We wish to show our respect to one another.’

‘Oh! that’s it. Well, I’ll see about it.’

‘Odious creature!’ said Lady Cariston to herself.

For the next few days he conducted himself without committing any glaring offence against good manners; amusing himself by shooting and riding.

It was then that a visitor arrived at the castle. This was Mr. Hamley Morris, who had written the letter which Lord Cariston had picked up and read in his wife’s boudoir.

Mr. Hamley Morris was tall and respectable, though not aristocratic in appearance. He was very reserved, seldom speaking without an object, as it seemed. He had short, dark brown hair, a bushy beard and whiskers. His attire, though not highly fashionable, was good, substantial, and very neat.

His eyes were bright and piercing ; his features regular, and habitually stern in their expression. He was muscular, and rather inclined to be stout.

Darby did not like this man. He frequently met him in the fields, and it seemed that Mr. Hamley Morris's chief occupation was to follow him about.

Once Morris said to him—

‘It’s a fine thing to be a gentleman.’

‘I should not think you had ever had an opportunity of judging,’ replied Darby, with a sneer.

‘Very clever,’ said Hamley Morris, with a smile. ‘It is to be hoped it will last.’

‘Last! What do you mean?’ asked Darby, beginning to tremble.

But when he looked for Morris, he found he was walking quietly away.

A little before Christmas, Mona, accompanying Marian Ingledeew, arrived at the castle.

Mr. Ingledeew remained by himself, at Heart’s Content. He was pursuing some archæological studies, and did not mind being alone. Besides, the distance between the two houses was so short, that he could run over whenever he liked, without any difficulty.

Darby was thrown a good deal in Marian’s society, and courted it.

She was very beautiful, and he fell in love with her, not taking any trouble to disguise his sentiments.

As for Marian, she treated him cavalierly, hating him cordially in her heart, and being angry with him for his presumption.

Out of respect for Ashley Leigh, no invitations had been sent out for Christmas. There was to be only a family party. No balls, no dinners, no display.

Mona had hoped to fascinate Darby, and she was furious when she saw the attention he paid to Marian.

Talking to him she said—

‘It seems you are not satisfied with obtaining the position of Ashley Leigh, you desire the girl he was in love with ; but, let me tell you, she respects his memory so much that she will never be yours.’

‘I will never rest until she is,’ he answered.

‘It would be better for you to turn your thoughts in another direction.’

‘What direction?’

‘I want some of the money you promised me, and I must have it, or——’

‘The time is not up yet,’ he interrupted.

‘Never mind that. Get the money, or dread the consequences. If you are wise, you will make a friend, not an enemy, of me. How would you like your house of cards to tumble about your ears?’

‘Don’t, for heaven’s sake, talk in that way!’ he cried in great trepidation.

‘Get me the money,’ answered Mona, resolutely.

‘Where am I to procure it?’ he asked, in perplexity.

‘That is not my business. In three days I must have it. Do you understand me?’

She walked away, leaving Darby in a perturbed state of mind.

Where was he to get the large sum of five thousand pounds? Would Lord Cariston give it to him? Assuredly her ladyship would not give him a penny, if she could help it. There was no sympathy between them.

He forthwith applied to Lord Cariston for the money, but, as he had expected, he was refused point blank.

‘A hundred or two you are welcome to,’ replied his lordship, ‘but I do not feel justified in supplying you with such an extravagant sum. What do you want it for? What can you want it for? You have everything you can wish for here.’

Darby was forced to content himself with a cheque for three hundred pounds.

That was a very little help to the accumulation of five thousand.

While he was racking his brain, and tortured by doubts and fears, he one day passed by the bedroom of Lady Cariston.

The door was open, and he saw, on a table, her jewel-case, which was unlocked.

The glittering contents were partially visible, and as he beheld the sparkling diamonds, and the artistically-wrought gold, he conceived an idea.

Lady Cariston’s jewels would enable him to satisfy the rapacity of Mona.

CHAPTER V.

THE CASTLE ON FIRE.

LADY CARISTON'S suite of apartments were in the left wing of the castle, as were the rooms apportioned to the use of Miss Ingledeu and Mona.

Between the two wings came the main portion of the building, in which were the banqueting, drawing, and other rooms.

In the right wing the servants slept.

Darby regarded the position of her ladyship's apartments with great care, and resolved, on Christmas Day, to make an attempt to possess himself of the jewels.

The day opened dull and heavy. The air was heavily charged with snow, which, about one o'clock, began to fall in feathery flakes, covering everything in winter's pallid garments.

The ladies had been to church in the morning, and in the afternoon Marian complained of illness, and retired to her bed-chamber.

A slight attempt at decoration had been made, but it was not very successful, as Lady Cariston discouraged anything that resembled festivity.

The mistletoe was not hung up in the hall, and the huge branches of ivy, laurel, and holly, which usually adorned the castle, were absent.

It promised to be a very gloomy Christmas, instead of a season of festivity and rejoicing, but every one secretly praised her ladyship because Ashley Leigh was a general favourite, and it was considered only right to pay a fitting tribute to his memory.

Marian did contrive to appear at dinner, but she retired as soon as the ladies rose from dessert.

According to custom, Lord Cariston had, with his own hands, mixed a loving cup.

'I am at a loss for a toast, my dear,' he said, addressing his

wife. 'Perhaps I may call upon Mr. Hamley Morris to give us one.'

'With pleasure,' replied Morris, raising the cup in his hand. 'I give you the "rightful heir."'

Then he drank deeply.

The toast was accompanied with a significant glance at Darby, who did not like it at all, as every one, except Mona and Lord Cariston, refused to pledge him.

Hamley Morris remarked that Mona drank the toast to Darby, and made a note of the circumstance; thinking it odd that she should espouse his cause, when she was so intimate with Marian, and had known Ashley Leigh so well.

'It seems to me,' said Darby, with a flushed face, 'that the toast was meant as a direct insult to me.'

'How so? Are you not the rightful heir?' asked Hamley Morris.

Darby bit his lip and was silent.

'You are too sensitive,' said Lord Cariston.

Darby got up and left the table, without a word of apology or excuse.

He was not seen again for some hours.

The castle clock was striking ten, when he crept gently upstairs, a small lamp in his hand, and determination expressed in his face.

He entered Lady Cariston's room, having satisfied himself that she was in the drawing-room, playing chess with her husband.

The jewel-case was where he had seen it on the former occasion.

Disregarding its weight, which was considerable, he seized it, and was about to make his way out of the apartment with it, when he heard voices on the stairs.

'Perhaps the wayward child has gone to bed, disdainingly to honour us with his company,' said the voice of Hamley Morris.

'Lord Cariston is annoyed. I wish you would prevail upon him to come down,' answered the voice of her ladyship; who added—'This should be a season of festivity, not——'

What else she said Darby did not stay to hear.

Quick as lightning he opened a window and threw the jewel-case out on the lawn.

Then he unhesitatingly set fire to the bed-curtains and those about the windows.

Instantly a dense smoke arose, which was followed by fiercely crackling flames.

The house was old, the wood-work dry, and everything in readiness for the appearance of the fiery demon. A volume of smoke was driven out on the landing by the wind which entered at the open window, and nearly choked her ladyship and Hamley Morris.

'Oh,' cried Lady Cariston, 'the castle is on fire! Save my jewels—the box on the table. I will give the alarm below. Heaven help us!'

'I will do my best, my lady,' answered Morris, who always preserved his presence of mind on an emergency.

Lady Cariston ran downstairs to give an alarm respecting the terrible occurrence, and to dispatch messengers, mounted on fleet horses, for the engines at Stanton.

Morris plunged into the smoke which was rapidly becoming thicker every moment,

Just at this crisis, Darby was forcing his way out.

The two men came into collision.

Hamley Morris was thrown violently against the door-post by Darby, who was advancing at a quicker pace, and heard the latter rush past him.

This aroused his suspicions.

Some one had been in Lady Cariston's apartment; therefore it was highly probable that the fire was the work of an incendiary.

Gasping for breath and crawling on his hands and knees, so as to get the benefit of any small current of comparatively fresh air, Hamley Morris reached the table.

He felt with his hands, and looked on its surface by the help of the flames, which had now seized upon the oak wainscoting, curiously carved by cunning hands of yore, and which cast a ruddy glare around. Nothing could he see of the jewel-case.

The heat of the fire compelled him to withdraw, and the eager flames followed him to the door, rolling over the landing, and licking the bannisters with their forked tongues.

The conflagration was becoming serious.

It threatened to involve the ancient castle in dire ruin.

Finding he could do no more, Hamley Morris went downstairs, to render what assistance he could, either by advice or action, in extinguishing the fire.

Darby had hastened to the lawn, and picked up the jewel-case, which he hastily hid in the midst of some evergreens, where he thought he could safely leave it until the morning.

All the servants were assembled, with pails and buckets, but the supply of water was difficult to obtain; it having to be carried from a frozen lake, distant about half-a-mile. A double chain of men was necessary for this purpose, which formed a picturesque appearance on the snow, which had fallen for some hours, and now lay thick upon the ground.

The fire had, in the short space of a quarter of an hour, gained a terrible mastery over the left wing. As the flames broke through the windows, their vivid light was seen for many miles around.

Three men had gone for the engines.

Fearing that the venerable pile would be destroyed before their arrival, many articles of value were hastily got out and placed upon the lawn.

The plate-chest was the centre of a collection of odds and ends, consisting of pianos, old furniture, valuable paintings by famous masters, and countless other things.

Hamley Morris was here, there, and everywhere.

Lord Cariston, deeply agitated, and incapable of exertion or direction, formed one of a melancholy group, consisting of his wife, Mona, and Darby, which was to be seen in front of the house, on a couple of hearthrugs considerably placed on the snow for them.

Suddenly Mona raised a cry.

‘Marian—Miss Ingledew!’ she cried.

‘What of her? Is she not here?’ asked Lord Cariston.

‘No, indeed. She went to lay down; complaining of indisposition.’

‘Oh, heaven!’ cried her ladyship, with sincere concern, ‘she will be burnt alive!’

Raising his voice, Lord Cariston cried—

‘A lady—Miss Ingledew, is in the left wing! A thousand pounds to the man who saves her!’

The ringing sound of his lordship’s voice electrified all who heard it.

Three men rushed to the house and ascended the grand staircase.

Hamley Morris was in front.

A solid body of flame barred his progress.

To attempt to break through it would have been madness. At a glance, he saw that the only way to save Miss Ingledew was through the window of her room, and by the aid of a ladder.

No time was to be lost, for the flames were spreading laterally with extraordinary rapidity.

Apparently she was unconscious of the immensity of the danger which threatened her.

Men ran hither and thither in search of a ladder, but, as sometimes happens when excitement runs high, one could not be found.

All at once a man darted from the crowd, bearing a ladder in his arms.

He placed it against the wall, and guided by the cries which arose on all sides, he selected the window of the room occupied by the poor girl.

Running up with considerable agility and undaunted courage, his form was visible to all, for the flames lighted up the scene with a vividness resembling that of noonday.

To the surprise of all, his face was concealed with a piece of black cloth, cut into the shape of a mask; so that while he appeared to be a young man, it was impossible to recognise his features.

The man in the mask found the window fastened. Dashing the framework to pieces with his fists, a shower of glass fell at the feet of those who were, with their arms, steadying the ladder.

Then he disappeared into the apartment.

The draught occasioned by the open window fanned the fire, which had already penetrated to Marian's bedroom, and a cloud of fire and smoke rushed out into the air.

Through this nothing could be seen.

The time that elapsed between the disappearance and the return of the adventurous stranger seemed an age to those who were expecting him.

He was on the topmost round of the ladder almost before he was perceived.

In his arm he carried something apparently inanimate.

It was the body of Marian Ingledew.

A great shout rent the air, in recognition of this heroic deed, and a throng awaited the man in the mask, who, reaching the ground, handed his burden to those nearest him, thereby diverting public attention from himself.

Slipping through the crowd, he was quickly lost to sight.

Marian was carried to Lord Cariston, and efforts were made to restore her to consciousness, which were speedily successful.

When she opened her eyes she was asked if she knew who had saved her, and replied in the negative, saying that she only remembered being half suffocated with smoke, trying to escape, and falling insensible upon the floor.

‘Where is the generous man who risked his life to save that of this young lady?’ cried Lord Cariston.

No one could answer the question.

In the confusion of the moment he had vanished, no one knew whither.

This remarkable incident created a profound sensation.

Speculation as to the identity of the man in the black mask was rife.

The arrival of the fire-engines from Stanton now drew the attention of the spectators into another channel.

A large quantity of hose was carried to the lake, and willing hands were found to man the engines, which quickly cast heavy jets of water upon the flames, which, owing to the direction of the wind, were confined to the left wing entirely.

No persuasion could induce Lord Cariston, or any of his party, to quit the premises until the fire was extinguished. The ladies, covered with rugs and furs, defied the inclemency of the weather, and encouraged by their presence those who were labouring in their behalf.

About one o’clock Mr. Ingledeew arrived from Heart’s Content, giving his friends a pressing invitation to come to his house, until the extent of the damage by fire and water could, in the morning, be estimated.

This was gladly accepted, and, in another hour, carriages being provided, the party left the castle for Heart’s Content, having seen the fire so far subdued that no farther danger was to be apprehended.

Darby had acted a very cowardly and pusillanimous part all through the fire. He had been as useless as the most terror-stricken woman, and merited the contempt of his conduct, which was openly expressed.

The fact was, he thought more of the jewels than anything else, and was afraid to venture far from where he had hidden them.

What did it matter to him if the castle were burnt to the ground?

When Marian Ingledeew was in danger he showed some agitation, but he had neither the sense nor the courage to do anything to save her.

Who the stranger was who had extricated her from her perilous position he was as much puzzled to guess as any one else.

Mr. Ingledeew had included Darby in his invitation, which he refused with thanks, saying he would not inconvenience him, as he had no doubt he could rough it in what remained of the castle; besides, it was necessary that some one should stay to look after the servants, to see no pillaging went on.

Mr. Hamley Morris also expressed his resolve of staying behind.

Darby favoured him with a frown, and told him he need not trouble himself, which had no effect upon the individual addressed, who repeated his determination, and turned his back on Darby.

Lord Cariston thanked them both, and said he felt proud of Darby's devotion to his interests.

Being accustomed to a life of labour, Darby had a habit of waking early. Since he had become a gentleman he did not rise when he woke; but on the morning after the fire, this custom served him in good stead.

He got up before it was light, and having noticed the room in which Hamley Morris slept, gently opened the door, extracted the key, and locked the room on the outside, taking the key with him.

The noise of the key grating in the lock roused Hamley Morris, who sprang out of bed, and found himself securely fastened in.

Guessing to whom he was indebted for this act of attention, he went to the window and looked out.

The day was just breaking; and he saw Darby by the imperfect light, groping in a group of evergreens.

Presently he found something, which he put under his arm, and walked rapidly away.

What this something was, Hamley Morris could not tell but he could guess.

Employing the faculty of putting this and that together, which he enjoyed in no common degree, he at once came to the conclusion that it was her ladyship's jewel-case!

The person he ran in contact with in the doorway of her bed-room could have been no other than Darby; who, to conceal his robbery, had set the house on fire.

Having satisfied himself that this was the case, Hamley Morris tried his utmost to get out of the bed-room in which he was locked.

This he was unable to do for some time; he had to ring the bell, and the servants were some minutes employed in breaking open the door.

Darby was not to be seen.

Where he had gone was a mystery, which Hamley Morris, who seemed to interest himself strangely in his affairs, could only tell by closely watching his movements.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES SUSPENDED.

THE scene at Hartshill Castle, after the fire, was a very melancholy one.

The snow near the burning wing had been melted away, or trodden into a black mass by many feet; and frozen hard by the frost which followed.

The firemen had returned to Stanton with the engines, leaving two of their number to keep guard over the smouldering beams and rafters, which still emitted a dull, heavy smoke.

So effectually had the fire been subdued, that there was not the slightest danger of its breaking out again.

The costly furniture and works of art, which had been placed together on the lawn, were still standing in the position in which they had been left.

Darby took a fleeting glance at the scene of desolation, which was his work, and hastened on; having business of importance to transact which brooked of no delay.

It was absolutely necessary to procure money for Miss Seafield.

He had made a daring venture to procure the jewels, and he had thought of a man in the neighbourhood of Stanton from whom he could obtain an advance.

This man was named Bloxam.

Jonas Bloxam was a man of property and an usurer. It was by the profitable and judicious exercise of usury that he had become rich.

Rumour said that he had once been an attorney, and that he had been struck off the rolls for some improper act. However that might be, it was certain that he had more than a cursory knowledge of law, and was capable of giving good legal advice to those who applied to him on matters of business.

He occupied a small but elegantly-built house, situated about a mile from Stanton. A few acres of land surrounding it called him master, and he was always at home till the

middle of the day to receive visitors. As may be imagined, Jonas Bloxam was anything but popular.

It was openly said that he had ruined innumerable farmers and tradesmen. Upon more than one fine estate he had laid his clutches, and, though living unostentatiously, Jonas Bloxam was an acknowledged power in the county of Midlandshire.

The hour of nine was striking as Darby walked up the short drive leading to the house.

Mr. Bloxam was standing at the breakfast-room window, looking over a lengthy document, upon which he was trying to throw as much light as possible. When he beheld Darby, he went into the hall and opened the door himself.

‘Good-morning,’ he said. ‘You are—I know your face somewhere. Who are you?’

‘The Honourable Darby Leigh,’ was the reply.

‘Oh, yes,’ answered Mr. Bloxam, with a grim smile, ‘now I recollect, otherwise Chiverton. Come in, Mr. Chiverton.’

Darby was nettled at this mode of address, but he was obliged to conceal his ill-temper, and he followed the usurer into the breakfast-room.

‘Take a chair. I have been expecting you,’ said Mr. Bloxam.

Darby sat down near the fire, and warming his hands, put his foot upon the handsome, inlaid jewel-case he had brought with him.

‘I hear you had a fire last night at the castle. Serious affair, eh?’ said Jonas Bloxam.

‘Not very. Only a wing burnt,’ said Darby.

‘Ah, so much the worse for trade. Now, what is your business? I have had my breakfast. Can I offer you anything?’

Darby had no appetite and he said so.

‘My lady mother,’ began Darby, ‘has given me leave to bring her jewels to you, to obtain an advance of money upon them. I have occasion for money just now, and Lord Cariston is not inclined to supply my wants.’

‘What do you want money for?’ inquired Jonas Bloxam, sharply.

‘Oh, I have my little expenses,’ replied Darby.

He raised his eyes to those of the usurer, who was a short, stout man, with a round, common-place face, quick in his manner, and disagreeable in his mode of addressing any one.

‘Show me the jewels,’ said the usurer.

Darby found that he had not the key of the case.

This was a difficulty which had not before occurred to him.

‘It is very odd that your lady mother should have given you the jewels to bring to me and forgotten to send the key,’ said Mr. Bloxam.

‘The whole affair was to be kept very secret, and it was done in a hurry,’ answered Darby in some confusion.

The usurer laughed loudly.

‘So I should think,’ he replied.

He looked about in a cabinet and found a chisel, which he handed to Darby, telling him to break the box open, which, with some exertion, he did.

Mr. Bloxam took out the jewels with tender care and examined them minutely.

‘Very chaste, very rare and valuable,’ he said; ‘Lady Cariston must be unusually good-natured to make such a sacrifice for you, young man.’

‘She is—she adores me,’ rejoined Darby.

‘No lies, if you please,’ said Mr. Bloxam, raising his voice for the first time. ‘I must have the truth told me by those who come here. Now, tell me the truth, the whole truth. Perhaps I know more than you suspect.’

Darby was silent.

He bit his nails uneasily, and cowered beneath the searching glance which Mr. Bloxam favoured him with.

‘If you have lost your tongue I must talk for you,’ said the usurer; ‘listen to me. You want money because you have to pay the promoter of the plot, which, in its successful issue, has placed you where you are.’

Darby sprang to his feet.

‘Do not deny it,’ said Mr. Bloxam. ‘Be content to confess all to me. I shall not betray you. Make me your friend, and you can have what money you require.’

As he spoke he touched the spring of a secret drawer in a desk which stood on a side table. This flew forward, displaying a pile of gold and notes, which did not fail to arrest Darby’s attention.

Mr. Bloxam plunged his hand into this mine of wealth and crumpled up the crisp notes in a manner that aroused Darby’s liveliest cupidity.

‘Now, Mr. Chiverton, you have seen my ability to oblige

you, and, to convince you of my willingness we must go on again,' said Jonas Bloxam.

The fact was he had had his suspicions about Darby's birth being genuine, and he had spoken to him in a decided manner to test the truth of his suspicions. The result perfectly satisfied so shrewd a man as Jonas Bloxam.

'You want money because you must pay your obligations. That is very proper. I am the last to find fault with a willingness to pay,' he resumed; 'you could not obtain money from Lady Cariston, because she hates you and refuses to believe in you, and you failed with his lordship, because he is averse to encouraging extravagance in the person of a young man who has been unaccustomed to handle large sums of money. Is it not so, Mr. Chiverton?'

He paused for a reply.

Darby had ceased to be offended at being called 'Mr. Chiverton.' He began to think that after all he could not do better than make a friend of this terrible Mr. Bloxam, who seemed to have the secrets of the human heart at his control.

'I will not deny what you have said,' he answered. 'Go on.'

'I intend to do so. Finding that you could not obtain money from your parents, you took secret counsel with yourself, the result of which is apparent in that jewel-case on my table, and the fire at Hartshill Castle last night. Now we come to another question. How much money do you want?'

'Five thousand pounds,' said Darby, shortly.

'A large sum. When must you have it?'

'In three days,' replied Darby, incautiously.

'Oh!' exclaimed Jonas Bloxam. 'Your creditor is imperative. Three days. Short notice, eh! Well, we perfectly understand one another, and I think I can let you have the money, provided——'

He paused again to count out the notes and gold he had in the secret drawer of the desk, saying—

'Fifty, one hundred, two hundred, two fifty,' and so on, as he proceeded.

When he had reckoned the five thousand pounds he continued—

'Provided you give me a little protection, such as I consider I have a right to demand.'

'Of what kind? Are not the jewels sufficient?' said Darby.

‘Stop a bit. It is a pity that all young men are so impatient.’

Mr. Bloxam took up a pen, and with deliberation wrote on a sheet of paper about a dozen lines, which he handed to his visitor.

‘Write that,’ he said, ‘and you shall have the money.’

Darby turned first red, and then as pale as death, as he read the paper, which was nothing more nor less than a confession of the imposition he had practised upon the credulity of Lord Cariston.

‘You are a fiend,’ he cried, angrily. ‘I will not place myself in your power. Why should I enable you to send me to penal servitude for life if it pleases you to do so.’

Jonas Bloxam shrugged his shoulders.

‘If you have my money, and we work together,’ he said, ‘it follows that our interests are identified, does it not?’

‘I will not do it.’

‘Take it or leave it.’

Mr. Bloxam now amused himself by filling in the body of a bill of exchange, drawn at twelve months after date, for seven thousand pounds.

This he pushed over to Darby, and dipping a pen in the ink, handed it to him, saying—

‘Try the new signature.’

Darby trembled all over, and big drops of perspiration fell from his forehead.

CHAPTER VII.

LAUGHED AT.

DARBY CHIVERTON was totally unable to overcome the trepidation he felt at the usurer's request that he should affix his signature to so dangerous a document as the confession which Jonas Bloxam had drawn up.

As he still sat, pale and trembling, without attempting to take up the pen, the usurer said—

‘The times are bad. The year has not been good. Farmers who owe me money have failed to pay, and I shall inconvenience myself by letting you have this money.’

‘You run very little risk,’ said Darby.

‘If you are the real son of Lord Cariston, your father will pay this bill for you, and I will let you have your letter back again.’

‘I swear to you——’

‘That is all very well; but I must protect myself,’ interrupted Mr. Bloxam. ‘When I have this letter and the bill I shall rest contented. If you are an impostor, and you don't pay me, I shall denounce you to the police, at the expiration of twelve months.’

Darby's hair bristled.

He did not speak.

‘Make haste,’ said Jonas Bloxam, playing with the notes. ‘Once more, I say, take it or leave it. We can finish the affair at once, if we like.’

The perspiration rolled down Darby's face.

‘You ask me to ruin myself,’ he said.

‘Not at all. It is a guarantee for my money. That is what I have a right to exact. When you have paid me, I will, as I said, give you back your letter.’

‘Really?’

‘I lend my money at the highest possible rate,’ answered Jonas Bloxam; ‘but I never break my word.’

A cloud passed before the eyes of Darby, and in that

cloud he saw the figure of Mona, tall, stately, unbending, regarding him threateningly.

‘Give me the paper,’ he said.

Of two evils he chose, as he thought, the least. He hastily wrote his signature to the bill, and signed the letter.

The latter document was to this effect—

‘DEAR MR. BLOXAM,

‘In consideration of your lending me five thousand pounds, of which I am in need, I hereby confess that I am not the son of Lord and Lady Cariston. My mother made a false statement on her deathbed. The plot was arranged between us; and I place myself at your mercy.

‘Yours faithfully,

‘DARBY LEIGH.

‘[Once known as Chiverton.]’

Jonas Bloxam dried both papers before the fire, and folding them up, placed them in the secret drawer of his desk.

Darby took the money, and, counting it, put the notes in his pocket.

‘Keep faith with me, my lad,’ said the usurer, ‘and we shall have no occasion to fall out; but if you trifle with me, I will send you to Portland Island, as sure as my name’s Bloxam.’

Darby trembled afresh, and shaking hands with his new friend, left the house, and walked rapidly down the drive.

In the road he ran up against a man who was standing still.

‘Hullo!’ exclaimed the man, ‘why don’t you look where you are going to?’

It was Hamley Morris.

‘Don’t you know me?’ said Darby.

‘It is you, eh? These dark mornings it is difficult to see,’ replied Morris. ‘Where have you been? Mr. Bloxam’s, is it not? A worthy money-lender, though he charges cent. per cent.’

‘I know one of the servants there,’ rejoined Darby.

‘Indeed. You should drop those low acquaintances now you have achieved a position,’ said Hamley Morris, mercilessly.

‘Good-bye,’ said Darby, ‘I am going to Heart’s Content, to breakfast.’

‘So am I. We will walk together.’

Hamley Morris took his arm, and they walked down the snow-covered road.

For some time they proceeded in silence.

‘I don’t know why you should fasten yourself upon me?’ said Darby, at length. ‘I have never sought your acquaintance.’

‘Possibly not. I want to talk to you, though,’ answered Hamley Morris, quietly.

‘To me?’

‘Yes—why not?’

‘You do not seem to understand the difference in our positions?’ said Darby, with an affectation of haughtiness.

‘You mean that I am an honest man, whose character is above suspicion, and you——’

‘Once for all, sir. I shall not allow myself to be insulted by you!’ cried Darby, angrily.

‘Very well. Let us change the conversation. What have you done with that little box, you raked out from amidst the bushes on the lawn, and started with this morning?’ asked Hamley Morris, unconcernedly.

‘You are mistaken,’ said Darby, his teeth chattering

‘You feel the cold. Walk more quickly; and answer my questions presently. Have you heard that Lady Cariston has lost her jewels in the fire?’

‘That is not surprising.’

‘Why not?’

‘Fire usually consumes everything that it comes in contact with,’ replied Darby more at his ease.

‘The fire never came in contact with those jewels, or it would have left some remains. By the way, what have you done with that little box, I spoke about just now?’

Darby wrested his arm away from Hamley Morris; and stopping in the road, asked—

‘What are you trying to do with me?’

‘Oh—nothing at all, my dear fellow. I only wish you to gratify my harmless curiosity.’

The two men looked at one another; and Darby’s eyes sought the ground.

Hamley Morris regarded him pityingly; and a smile played around the corners of his mouth.

With every appearance of sincerity Darby assured Hamley Morris that the box of which he spoke contained property of his own.

‘Which you have deposited with Mr. Bloxam, I suppose,’ said Morris.

‘Exactly.’

‘It is odd that you should have any property to dispose of, considering who and what you were so short a time back; and it is also odd that Lady Cariston’s jewels should be missing,’ said Hamley Morris.

‘Anyone to hear us, would think you were a detective talking to a thief,’ said Darby, laughing, with an affectation of good humour.

‘Perhaps we are respectively what you suggest, Mr. Chiverton,’ answered Morris, drily.

‘Sir,’ answered Darby, drawing himself up, ‘you have persisted in making insulting remarks ever since I had the misfortune to meet you this morning. You assail me in every way, and I will not stand it. I have done nothing, that I am aware of, to offend you or incur your hostility. In future I shall refuse to hold any sort of communication with you. If you continue to subject me to annoyance, I will see what a little personal chastisement will do for you.’

Having delivered himself of this speech, which was a lengthy and elegant one for him, Darby strode on in advance. Though tall and muscular, Hamley Morris was no match for Darby, who had been brought up in the woods, and was as hard as iron, as well as lithe and active.

Forgetting this, Morris advanced towards him, and laying his hand on his arm, said—

‘Not so fast, my friend, we have other things to talk about.’

Darby’s only reply to this speech was rapidly to retreat a step, and, extending his arm, strike his unfortunate acquaintance under the ear.

The effect of the blow was to send him staggering across the road, until he fell into the ditch, where he lay for some minutes in a confused, half-stunned state.

‘That will teach the fellow better manners,’ said Darby to himself, and, increasing his pace, he hurried on to Heart’s Content.

When Hamley Morris ‘picked himself up,’ as he expressed it, he felt rather dizzy, and came to the conclusion that it was not advisable to rouse Darby’s temper too much.

‘Never mind,’ he muttered, ‘It will all go into the settlement of accounts, which must take place sooner or later. I can afford to wait; only it makes me more bitter against him. Whew! how hard he hits. His fist is like a sledge hammer.’

Reaching Heart's Content about mid-day, Darby found its inmates in a great state of confusion.

Lord Cariston had been seized with a fit.

He was of an apoplectic nature and the excitement of the previous night had proved too much for him.

Two doctors were in the house, but their skill had not yet been sufficient to restore him to consciousness, and it was feared that he would die before the day closed.

This news made Darby's heart beat faster.

If Lord Cariston died the title would be his, and his power, together with his command of money, unlimited.

Mr. Ingledew and Marian did all they could to comfort Lady Cariston in her affliction, but were unsuccessful.

'If he would only recover his consciousness,' she said, 'if he would only recognise me and make some provision for the future. It is miserably selfish of me to talk like this, but it is excruciating to think that the wretched impostor, whom he has recognized as his son, will take everything.'

'Let us hope for the best,' said Mr. Ingledew.

'I cannot hope; my presentiments point the other way,' she said, weeping.

Darby was particularly anxious.

He kept on asking for admission to the sick man's room, and when refused by the doctors, he waited outside and pestered them with innumerable questions.

Towards evening the patient grew worse.

He had not been conscious since his seizure, and it was feared that he would die without being able to take leave of his family.

A report was brought in respecting the fire at Hartshill Castle, which no one but Darby cared to read. He perused it, and found to his satisfaction that the damage was comparatively slight. The main portion of the building and one wing being quite habitable, while a few months would suffice to build up the part which had been consumed by the flames.

No one at Heart's Content thought of going to rest that night.

All awaited the appearance of the doctors, to tell them either that the end was approaching, or that the malady from which Lord Carriston suffered had taken a turn for the better.

Before morning all was over.

Lord Cariston, at a comparatively early age, breathed his last, without being conscious from the time of his seizure until the hour of his death.

The funeral of Ashley Leigh had been a very quiet and private one at Kensal Green, but that of Lord Cariston was an expensive and grand affair; his remains were deposited in the family vault, and Darby was made chief mourner.

Lady Cariston was much affected.

She continued to reside with Mr. Ingledeu and Marian, at Heart's Content.

Darby, however, took up his abode at the castle, and lived there alone; he having intimated to Hamley Morris that he could dispense with his company, which compelled Morris to accept the hospitality of Mr. Ingledeu, which was gladly extended to him, at the solicitation of Lady Cariston.

For society Darby depended upon a few of the officers quartered at Stanton, upon the vicar, the doctor, and Mr. Suarley, the lawyer.

He took the title of Lord Cariston and took possession of the property, which no one could prevent him doing, as there was nobody to contest his right, and the late lord had openly recognized and received him as his son.

Lady Cariston had a very small income of her own, which was hers before her marriage, but beyond this she had nothing.

Darby informed her that she might live at the castle if she chose, but she indignantly refused his offer.

It was reported that he drank very deeply, and gambled occasionally with varying luck.

He was received politely whenever he called at Heart's Content, which he frequently did, for he was very fond of Marian.

This persistence in a hopeless passion enraged Mona, who, more than ever now, wished to be Darby's wife.

He had paid her the money he had borrowed from Jonas Bloxam, and she had not asked him for more. Occasionally, when he thought of the usurer and the terrible confession he had locked up in his desk, he trembled.

But he would drown all anticipation of the future in copious draughts of wine, and comfort himself with the reflection that he was Lord Cariston and master of Hartshill.

Among the late lord's papers he found several bonds of

Mr. Ingledew's; which proved that the antiquary had borrowed money from him at various times.

Darby knew that he was only a tenant of Heart's Content, and shrewdly suspected that he had not paid any rent for many years.

Mr. Snarley, the solicitor, of whom we have spoken, was a Stanton man, and not the attorney employed by Lady Cariston. He was a rival of his, and had purposely been engaged by Darby.

To him the new lord gave all the deeds, bonds, and papers, relating to Heart's Content, to look over.

One night, about six weeks after the funeral of Lord Cariston, there was the usual dinner party at the castle.

It consisted of Captain Scudamore, Snarley, Mr. Simms, Lieutenant Wood, and some others; who made a big hole in the wine-bins of the late lord; and rather patronised Darby.

At dinner, Captain Scudamore said—

‘By the way, Cariston, I meant yesterday to ask you if you were in any way pledged to Mr. Ingledew; as Heart's Content would make a splendid hunting box for a few months in the glen, and I should like to rent it of you.’

‘I scarcely know,’ answered Darby. ‘Snarley can tell us, I believe.’

‘He is simply a tenant-at-will, my lord!’ replied Snarley. ‘You could turn him out at a moment's notice.’

‘Really. Well, Scudamore, I will give you an answer in a day or two.’

‘Thanks,’ said the captain. ‘I have seen better places, and more game; but I should like to have you for a neighbour, you know.’

This compliment pleased the new lord.

‘When are we to have that day's shooting in the water-meadows, Cariston?’ inquired Lieutenant Wood.

‘When you like. I can lend you some of my fast-travelling setters; choice dogs they are, with capital noses.’

‘I prefer a couple of my own,’ was the answer. ‘Many thanks for your offer. Mine are steady, old, three mile-an-hour dogs, which will stand a day and a night without breaking their point, and bring their game to hand.’

This was the sort of conversation which went on for hours, unless some pretty girl in the neighbourhood was mentioned by name.

‘Miss Ingledew is a fine girl!’ observed Mr. Simms.

‘I like the governess best!’ remarked Snarley.

‘She is too cold for my fancy,’ said Captain Scudamore. ‘What do you say, Cariston? You don’t quite hit it off in that quarter, do you?’

‘I am very friendly with the Ingledews; and I quite agree with you that Marian is perfection,’ replied Darby.

His friends, seeing which way the wind blew, as they phrased it, changed the subject.

On the day following, Darby rode over to Heart’s Content; and finding Marian alone in the drawing-room, determined to take the opportunity of speaking to her seriously.

He thought that she would never be able to resist his title, his wealth, and position; and if she did, he resolved to threaten the father with ejection, unless he coerced his daughter into a marriage repugnant alike to her feelings and her taste.

Ashley Leigh being dead, as Darby supposed, he considered this an additional reason why Marian should yield to his wishes.

She had lately recovered her serenity, and was singing when Darby entered, which made him believe that she had quite forgotten her first love.

‘Oh, good morning,’ she exclaimed, when she saw him, leaving off her song. ‘I will tell papa you are here.’

‘Please do nothing of the sort,’ he said. ‘It is with you I wish to talk.’

‘With me?’

Marian Ingledew elevated her eyebrows with surprise

What could Darby have to say to her?

She did not suspect for a moment that he had the audacity to love her, and tell her of his passion.

‘I must chance offending you, Miss Ingledew—Marian, if I may call you so,’ he began.

‘If you call me by my Christian name, sir,’ she said, purposely omitting on all occasions to give him his title, ‘you will be guilty of an unpardonable presumption.’

‘Forgive me, I had hoped it was otherwise; that I had made some impression upon your heart.’

‘My heart! Whatever can you mean? Excuse me for laughing, but it is too ridiculous,’ she said, giving unrestrained way to her mirth.

Darby reddened to the roots of his hair.

‘This is no laughing matter, Miss Ingledeew,’ he said, gravely.

‘You are right,’ she answered. ‘It is not. I thank you for recalling me to myself. I am about to leave you now, sir, and I shall repeat all that has passed between us to my father, and beg him to exert himself to protect me from similar annoyance for the future.’

‘So will I talk to your father,’ cried Darby, angrily, ‘and I think I can say that which will induce him to teach you to be more civil when I next speak to you.’

‘Indeed,’ said Marian, her lip curling with supreme contempt; ‘that is just the kind of speech I expected from you.’

‘You seem to forget who I am,’ he exclaimed.

‘Oh, no. I never can forget that,’ she replied, with deep meaning.

Darby bit his nether lip till the blood came.

Marian walked from the room, with a queenly dignity she knew well how to assume.

‘I’ll bring her down on her knees,’ he muttered; ‘or out of this house they go, and the old man shall see the inside of the debtor’s ward of the county jail.’

He paced the room, impatiently, for some time, guessing that Marian would proceed at once to her father, who would, in his turn, seek him.

Nor was he mistaken.

Mr. Ingledeew, a little excited, came into the drawing-room, and, in a nervous manner, peculiar to him, exclaimed—

‘What am I to understand, Lord Cariston, from what my daughter has just related to me?’

‘Only that she is a wayward child, sir, and I am her most devoted admirer,’ answered Darby.

‘I am sorry for you, then, as she assures me she is indissolubly wedded to the past.’

‘The past?’

‘That is to say, she can never forget Mr. Ashley Leigh.’

‘In that case, she has an odd way of showing her grief,’ answered Darby. ‘She always seems merry enough, and was singing when I came in.’

‘It is but for you to understand, once for all, I think, my lord, that you have no chance of gaining my daughter’s love.’

‘No chance,’ repeated Darby, slowly.

‘None whatever.’

‘Very well,’ continued Darby, ‘now, Mr. Ingledeew, let us

talk about a little matter of business which nearly concerns you.'

'If you please,' replied Mr. Ingledew, looking rather surprised.

'You are aware, I presume, that Heart's Content is my property?'

'Ah, yes; but I will pay you a rent for it, if that is what you want,' said the old gentleman, still more nervously.

He was much attached to the old place, and it would have cost him a pang to leave it.

'Have you forgotten that during the lifetime of the late Lord Cariston, you borrowed money from him?'

'I recollect it perfectly.'

'And the amount?'

'Several thousands.'

'For which you gave him bonds?'

'I did,' said Mr. Ingledew. 'But——'

'What?' asked Darby.

'Lord Cariston assured me that those bonds had been cancelled. He threw them into the fire, I think he said, and assured me I should never hear of them again.'

'Possibly he intended to do so; but those bonds are in existence; are in my hands, Mr. Ingledew, and as a part of my patrimony, have become mine. Now, what I want to ask you is, where would you be if I were to press for payment of these bonds?'

Darby spoke in a loud tone of triumph.

Mr Ingledew was completely thunderstruck at this question.

At length he answered, 'God, in his mercy only knows.'

He sank into a chair, and sighing heavily began to stir up the fire, in a restless and uneasy manner.

Darby watched him with a sense of superiority, and enjoyed his victory.

'I could not pay it,' said Mr. Ingledew, in a hollow voice, 'that is certain. I could not possibly pay you.'

CHAPTER VIII.

EXPULSION.

‘I DON’T want to be hard upon you,’ said Darby, in a patronising voice, ‘and if you would only use your influence with your daughter, all might be settled in a friendly way.’

‘In what way?’ said Mr. Ingledew, looking on.

‘Why, just make us man and wife, and you could live here for ever.’

‘You do my daughter too much honour, my lord,’ the old man replied, with a tinge of sarcasm in his voice.

‘Oh! no, not at all,’ said Darby, mistaking his meaning, ‘I know she has not a penny, and your family is nothing; but she is a passable girl enough and I have taken a fancy to her, that is the long and short of it.’

Mr. Ingledew’s face became burning hot.

‘I believe it is a good thing for lords to marry commoners sometimes,’ continued Darby, puffed up with pride. ‘Of course I make a sacrifice, but she’s worth it. I do think she’s worth it.’

‘Now, my lord, allow me to speak,’ said Mr. Ingledew, with sudden energy.

‘Certainly,’ said Darby, putting his hands in his pockets and setting his back to the fire.

‘Do you suppose that I would force my daughter’s will, or sacrifice her happiness for an hour even, to render my position more bearable?’

‘If you are not an idiot, I should think you would,’ Darby answered, coarsely.

‘Do you dare to use such language to me, and in my own house,’ shouted the antiquary, white with passion.

‘Your house?’ sneered Darby. ‘That is questionable.’

‘At all events, it is mine till I leave. Come what may, I will be master now, and I order you to quit it instantly.’

‘But, my dear sir, Marian——’

‘I forbid you to mention her name. Out of my house, this instant,’ vociferated Mr. Ingledew.

‘You shall repent this,’ exclaimed Darby, going towards the door.

Mr. Ingledeew sank once more into his chair, inarticulate with rage.

Darby, seeing that his farther stay at present would be useless, quitted the apartment and mounted his horse.

‘There is something very odd about these gentlemen, as they term themselves,’ he said to himself, as he rode along. ‘You never know how to speak to them for fear of offending them. It is impossible for a man, who has not been brought up amongst them, ever to hope to understand them.’

Marian saw her suitor ride away, and anxiously sought her father, to hear in what manner he had got rid of him

She found the old gentleman much perturbed, and inquired the cause of his grief.

‘Ah, my dear,’ he said, ‘it was a bad day for all of us when this young fellow came into the title and estates. What do you think he threatened me with?’

‘I cannot tell; though I can readily imagine anything to his prejudice,’ replied Marian.

‘With expulsion from Heart’s Content, unless—unless——’ He hesitated.

‘Unless I consented to marry him. Was it not so?’

Mr. Ingledeew nodded.

‘Have him for a husband, indeed,’ continued Marian, with a toss of the head. ‘I would rather live and die an old maid. But can he, papa, do as he says?’

‘I fear he can,’ answered Mr. Ingledeew.

‘How is that?’

‘Being on such very friendly terms with the late Lord Cariston, I never asked him for a lease, my dear. It would have seemed that I distrusted him. I could not do it; nor did there appear any necessity for it as we were sure of Ashley Leigh’s protection. Consequently, I am merely what the lawyers call a tenant-at-will, and can be turned out at any moment.’

‘Cannot Lady Cariston do something?’

‘Nothing at all.’

‘Well, we must go somewhere else; that is the long and short of it,’ answered Marian. ‘I am sorry for you, dear papa, but you would not wish me to marry that man to save you a little inconvenience?’

‘Certainly not. That is precisely what I told him.’

‘Oh, we can laugh at his threats.’

‘You have not heard the worst yet.’

‘Indeed!’

‘I borrowed money from my old friend Cariston,’ Mr. Ingledew went on, ‘and the securities I gave for the advances are still in existence, and have fallen into the hands of this villain, who will seize and imprison me.’

‘He dare not be so base.’

‘In my opinion he is capable of anything.’

Lady Cariston and Mona, who had been out for a walk together, came in at this juncture, and were very indignant at the news which awaited them.

It mattered very little to Mona; but she felt really angry at Darby’s having proposed to Marian, while she was pleased in proportion at his having been rejected.

‘Let him do his worst; perhaps his career may not be so prosperous as he anticipates,’ said Lady Cariston.

‘You forget, my lady,’ Mona ventured to say, ‘that you are speaking of your son.’

‘I have never acknowledged him as my son,’ was the stern and uncompromising answer, ‘I have steadily believed, and assert him to be an impostor.’

‘The evidence was clear enough,’ said Mona.

‘Not to me.’

‘At least to Lord Cariston and his advisers,’ Mona persisted.

‘Pray do not irritate me, Miss Scafield,’ said her ladyship, petulantly; ‘what interest have you in supporting his claim.’

‘I! oh, none whatever.’

‘Then please cease doing so, as your advocacy annoys me.’

Mona walked out of the room and went up one flight of stairs, as if she intended to change her things; but altered her mind, and, quitting the house, walked across the fields to Hartshill Castle.

‘Is it not strange that your governess should be such a partizan of this young Chiverton?’ remarked Lady Cariston.

‘I think she admires him,’ said Marian with a smile.

‘Or his position,’ said her ladyship, drily.

For a long time the position of affairs was talked over.

No satisfactory conclusion was arrived at. As we have stated, Lady Cariston was left very poorly provided for; owing to her husband’s dying intestate, and in so sudden a manner, that he could make no sort of provision for her.

It followed, therefore, that she was unable to help Mr. Ingledew with pecuniary assistance.

‘If the worst comes,’ she said, ‘I am resolved Marian shall not marry, him; but, perhaps, before the crisis comes, the storm, which is gathering over the usurper’s head will burst.’

‘To what storm do you allude,’ asked Mr. Ingledew.

‘I cannot say more at present, even to you, my dear old friend,’ answered Lady Cariston. ‘But trust me, there are foes at work which are antagonistic to this young man.’

These words set Mr. Ingledew thinking: but, returning to his study, he soon forgot all his troubles in examination of a curious fossil, which had been dug up by a labourer near the ruins of the abbey.

The winter, though not very severe lost the intensity with which it set in. February appeared mild and genial for that time of the year, and Mona had an agreeable walk through the fields to Hartshill Castle.

While crossing them she heard the sound of a gun, and, presently, Darby appeared, a little to the left of her; he had reached home, and gone out with his dogs after the partridges.

He saluted her gruffly, and was going on over the heavy ground.

Mona had remarked that he had avoided her for some time past, but she had no intention of allowing him to escape this time.

‘He wants to kick down the ladder by which he rose,’ she said; adding aloud, ‘I have come over on purpose to see you, and I request that you will stay and talk to me.’

‘I don’t wish to do so,’ he answered, ‘why should I! Haven’t I paid you the money you asked for? What more do you want?’

‘More money. Double, treble, the amount you have given me. Do you not know that people must be paid for keeping secrets, Darby Chiverton?’

The cold, hard voice in which she spoke rendered Darby uneasy.

‘I shall go abroad, if I am to be worried in this way,’ he said, with the sulky air of a contradicted child.

‘Possibly you will. But if you do, the government shall pay your passage. I will take care of that!’ answered Mona.

‘Don’t talk like that. Let’s have no foolishness,’ said Darby, growing still more uneasy. ‘If it’s money your in

want of, I'll find it for you. I suppose you want to start in some business, eh? The fancy goods and Berlin wool line, eh?'

Mona smiled disdainfully at this suggestion.

What a very bad judge of character and human nature, especially female human nature, Darby was!

'You have proposed to Miss Ingledew?' she said, not caring to answer him.

'I did, and——'

'She refused you. It is as well for you to learn that there is no chance in that quarter.'

'I'll make her have me. I'll turn them out of house and home, and put the father in prison!' said Darby, threateningly.

'That will do you no good. You will be no nearer the object of your ambition than you were before. The girl hates you and will not be dazzled by your rank and fortune. The effect will be simply this—Mr. Ingledew will go through the bankruptcy court; and Marian will live with Lady Cariston until their affairs are settled.'

'She'll submit, if she loves her father: and the old man's fond of the place. He's lived at Heart's Content so many years.'

'That does not matter,' replied Mona, in her decisive way. 'Marian will never be yours; so you may as well dismiss the idea from your mind at once and for ever; and as you are so fond of threatening, listen to me.'

'To you!'

'Yes. Why should I not threaten in my turn?' asked Mona, with a mocking laugh. 'I am in a position to do so. Do you think that when I conceived the idea of placing you where you now are, that I should be satisfied with a few paltry thousands?'

'I run all the risk!' Darby said.

'Listen to me!' cried Mona, impatiently. 'Don't suppose for a moment that I have any affection for you. But I, nevertheless, want you to make me Lady Cariston.'

'What!' said Darby, completely astounded. 'Marry you!'

'That is the way in which you can save yourself from destruction. I have made, and I can unmake.'

'You know I love Marian,' he said in confusion.

'Put love out of the question. It need not exist with you

and I; settle a handsome sum upon me and we will separate on the day of the marriage. All I want is the title, and money enough to support the position.'

'But once married, how can I ever hope to possess Marian?'

'You have no chance. Have I not told you so? Why will you persist in chasing a phantom?'

'One word.'

'The matter will not bear argument; it is a waste of time. Make me a friend if you will, and live in peace and prosperity. Make me an enemy, and see what will happen. I will shatter my work to pieces. You are a thing of my hands, just as much as if you were so much potter's clay.'

While speaking, they had been standing near a hedge; and had been guilty of an imprudence in not moving farther afield.

Darby was trembling violently, when he heard a noise, apparently coming from the ditch.

Being physically strong, he leaped through a gap, Mona watching him anxiously.

There was almost immediately the sound of a scuffle.

Loud cries arose.

Presently Darby re-appeared, dragging after him the body of a man, which he kicked and cuffed unmercifully.

'I'll teach you to listen in ditches, you cowardly vagabond!' he said. 'This isn't the first time you have played the spy on me, you miserable hound!'

With an effort the man released himself from Darby's powerful grasp, and retreating a few paces, shook himself, and collected his confused senses.

With an inward tremor and a sinking of the heart, Mona recognised Hamley Morris.

She had always entertained a distrust of this man.

How much of their conversation had he overheard?

This was the alarming question which presented itself both to her mind and that of Darby.

Hamley Morris did not seem much worse for the shaking and beating he had received. He arranged his coat, and bowing to Mona, said—

'Delightful place for conspirators to meet, Miss Seafield.'

'What do you mean, sir?' she answered, with some composure.

'I have to thank you,' he said, 'for placing me in posses-

sion of much valuable information, which, I have no doubt, I shall know how to turn to good account. Up to the present time, although I had suspected it, I was not aware that you and Mr. Chiverton were acting in concert, and that you were, if I may express myself, the motive power in the plot which has made him Lord Cariston. At present I have the honour to wish you good-morning. You shall hear of me again, shortly. I will not forget the attention you have shown me to-day.'

This address threw them both into much alarm.

The mock politeness with which Hamley Morris spoke was more terrifying than open menaces.

As he walked away, Darby grasped his gun nervously.

'Not now,' said Mona, laying her hand upon his arm.

'The meddling fool,' answered Darby. 'I had a mind to put a charge of shot in him.'

'He knows too much. I think he must be in the pay of Lady Cariston, and is brought down here especially to serve her ends and unravel the mystery which she supposes exists.'

'What shall we do?' asked Darby, in perplexity.

'We are not safe while that man lives. Can you find your father?' asked Mona.

'Yes, without difficulty. He has sent me a note, saying he wants to see me.'

'Ah, he is anxious to have his reward. You must see him.'

'To what end?'

'Give or promise him what money he wants,' replied Mona. 'But only on condition that he puts this man out of the way. A shot from behind a hedge will do it safely. When people play for the high stakes that we do, they must not hesitate at trifles.'

'I will see the old man,' Darby replied.

'You fully understand what I mean?'

'I do. Leave it to me.'

'I will do so; and the other matter in negotiation between us will stand over for a few days. This is a pressing danger and must be first attended to.'

Darby again promised that he would see Daddy Chiverton without delay, and Mona, ill at ease, left him to return to Heart's Content.

The appearance of Hamley Morris on the scene, in the character of an enemy, had somewhat disarranged her ambitious schemes, and she was sure that no security could be enjoyed while he continued to exist.

Darby shouldered his gun, and instead of going back to the castle, walked straight to the wood at the skirts of which Daddy Chiverton's cottage was situated.

About an hour's brisk walking brought him to it.

The old man had been getting impatient for his reward, or his share of the plunder, as Mona had surmised, and knowing that his son would obey his summons at his earliest convenience, he was waiting about for him.

The thin smoke curled up from the little chimney, and Darby, pushing the door open, walked in.

Daddy Chiverton was sitting before the fire, smoking a short clay pipe, black from constant use.

He did not rise as his son entered.

Pointing to a broken cane-bottomed chair, he motioned him to sit down.

'You have been a long time coming, or I should not have written to you,' he said.

'What do you want?' asked Darby, laconically.

'Money, my lad; not a heap down, but something every quarter.'

'You can't spend it here.'

'I don't intend to try,' answered Daddy Chiverton. 'Now you're a lord there's a great distance between us, and I couldn't mix with your friends, so I'm going to take myself off, right away.'

'Where are you going to?'

'I don't know yet. London first, I think.'

'You shall have what you ask for,' replied Darby. 'But there is something you must do for it; a man has been set on to watch me, by her ladyship, and he's found out a good deal; he must be put out of the way. You lay wait for him, and fire at him, some fine night. Nobody will suspect you, and in London you'll be safe enough.'

'It's as bad as that, is it?' queried the old man.

'Yes,' replied Darby, gloomily.

'Who is the man?'

'His name is Hamley Morris, he lodges at Farmer Painter's, the Low Wood Farm.'

‘I know it.’

There was a silence of some minutes’ duration.

‘You must not be turned out now, Darby; that would never do. I want to live an idle life in London, and have plenty to eat, and drink, and smoke, like a gentleman, and nothing to do for it. This Hamley Morris shan’t stand in the way,’ said Daddy Chiverton.

‘You’ll do the job?’

‘Trust me. I’ll manage it. Leave him to me,’ said the father, with a malevolent glance. ‘All you have to do is to place a hundred pounds, every quarter, for me in the bank at Stanton, and I’ll send for it from London; and give me something to start with.’

Darby carelessly tossed him his purse.

‘There is a lot in it. I don’t know how much,’ he said.

‘I daresay it will do. I can always write for more,’ answered Daddy.

‘Is that all?’ asked Darby.

‘Yes. I don’t know as I have anything more to say to you.’

‘Then I’ll be going’ said this dutiful son.

Shouldering his gun again, Darby nodded to his father and quitted the cottage.

Old Daddy remained plunged in thought for some time, thinking over the commission to murder, which had been given him.

Rising after a time, he said to himself—

‘I’ll go and potter about the Low Wood Farm, to get a look at this Hamley Morris. It won’t do to make a mistake in an affair of this sort.’

CHAPTER IX.

ON THE TRACK.

DADDY CHIVERTON was well known all about the country, and when he sauntered up to the out-buildings of Low Wood Farm he saw a couple of men in the employ of Mr. Painter, the farmer, who spoke good-humouredly to him.

‘Easy time now, Daddy,’ said one.

‘How’s that?’ he asked.

‘Your son’s a gentleman, and you’ve no call to work.’

‘Oh! I like doing nothing,’ replied Daddy Chiverton.

‘You’ve done it all your life nearly,’ said the man, ‘and you ought to be used to it now. I don’t call poaching anything, you know, Daddy.’

‘Never mind me. Let me alone,’ said the old man, nettled at these remarks, ‘what are you about?’

‘Just going to get the shay ready to take Mr. Morris to Stanton,’ was the answer.

‘Who’s he?’

‘A gentleman lodging with our governor.’

‘Do you drive him?’

‘I shall to-day. There and back.’

‘What time do you return?’

‘After dark, I suppose. But you’re asking a lot of questions. What is it to you what time we come back?’

‘Oh, nothing much. Good-day to you,’ said the old man, walking on.

‘He’s a character,’ said the farm-labourer, whose name was Dennis, to his companion.

‘Ah! they’re all a bad lot,’ was the reply.

‘That’s true as Gospel; though they have had a wonderful rise in the world,’ remarked Dennis.

Daddy Chiverton was satisfied with the intelligence he had gained. It was not necessary for him to identify personally Hamley Morris. He was well acquainted with Dennis, and as the latter was going to drive Mr. Morris to Stanton, in farmer Painter’s chaise, he could not make a mistake, for the

man who occupied the second seat in the trap would be the victim he wanted to kill.

This was how he reasoned.

Going back to his cottage, he loaded his gun, which was double-barrelled, and waited for night.

At half-past eight the moon would rise, and he would be enabled distinctly to see objects passing along the road.

He was accounted an excellent shot, and was wont to boast that he never missed his aim.

When it grew dark, he took up a position by the side of the road, hiding himself, but reserving a gap through which he could see and fire when he had covered the object of his aim. Very slowly the time passed.

Daddy Chiverton saw the moon rise, and its rays silver everything that came within their influence.

When he was nearly worn out with watching and cold, for it was a clear, frosty night, and his cramped position was becoming painful, he heard the sound of wheels.

There was nothing much in that.

Several carts and carriages had passed him but something told him that now his victim was approaching.

He trusted his murderous instinct, cocked his gun, and raised it to a position.

A chaise, drawn by one horse, came in sight.

It was driven by Dennis, and by his side was a tall man, with a bushy beard and whiskers.

Without his being aware of it, Daddy Chiverton's shadow was partly cast across the road.

When the chaise was near enough, Chiverton drew the trigger, but just at that moment the old mare which drew the gig shied at the shadow so providentially made manifest, and the chaise swerved on one side, so that the bullet grazed the tip of the horse's ear, and did no harm.

Daddy Chiverton uttered a curse, and fired a second time, but not under such favourable circumstances.

The gig was being carried along at a tremendous pace by the mare as the ball rattled after it, and it lodged in the wood-work behind without doing any further damage.

Thinking the last shot had done its work, Daddy Chiverton determined to take himself off to London by some train going up that night.

On his way to Stanton he passed a fish-pond, into which he

cast his gun, and gaining the railway station, he booked himself to the Metropolis.

When the train came up he got into a third-class carriage, and was whirled swiftly along the iron road.

As may be imagined, the attack made upon the gig startled its inmates not a little.

Dennis, do what he could, was unable to pull the mare up, until covered with foam, and with quivering flanks, she reached the homestead.

Dismounting from the chaise, Hamley Morris examined it and found the bullet-hole.

‘A narrow escape for both of us, sir,’ said Dennis, joining him.

‘For me, not for you. I expected something of this sort,’ answered Morris, quietly, ‘and I was prepared.’

As he spoke he unbuttoned the front of his shirt, and showed Dennis a coat of mail, the chainwork being very finely made.

‘I always wear this,’ he added ‘when I expect danger, and even if the clumsy ruffian had hit me I should not have been killed.’

‘Then you don’t suppose it was robbers, sir?’ asked Dennis.

‘Certainly not.’

‘May I make so bold as to ask who it was?’

‘You may; but you won’t get an answer, my good fellow,’ said Hamley Morris, with a smile.

‘Am I to say anything about it, sir?’ continued the man.

‘It is not a secret. Say what you like.’

After partaking of a cup of tea at the farm, Hamley Morris walked on to Heart’s Content, and had an interview with Lady Cariston.

Mona saw him as he came away, and was putting on his coat in the hall.

‘The old fool missed his aim,’ he said, as if talking to himself.

Mona started.

Hamley Morris looked at her, but she affected not to notice him, and went upstairs.

Her self-possession under trying circumstances was wonderful.

Morris went to rest early and rose at daybreak.

He found Dennis in the yard, and said to him—

‘You know the country round about pretty well, I suppose.’

‘I ought to do so, sir, considering I was born and bred here,’ answered Dennis.

‘Very well. You can earn half-a-sovereign by taking me to one or two places. I will explain your absence to Mr. Painter, should he notice it.’

‘I’m your man, sir, where to first?’

‘I suppose you know an eccentric character, named Daddy Chiverton?’

‘Him as had the changed son? Yes, I know him sir.’

‘I want to go to the cottage he occupied.’

‘Maybe he is at home; and, if so, he won’t like visitors; he’s never very sociable.’

‘He is not there. He has left this part of the country by this time—I’ll answer for that,’ rejoined Hamley Morris with a confident smile. ‘Lead on.’

Dennis going first, led the way to the wood, and by a short cut, to the cottage, which, as Morris had surmised was empty. Some embers were smouldering on the hearth, and in the cupboard were some provisions—half a loaf, cold game, and a bit of cheese.

‘Are you hungry?’ said Hamley Morris, pointing to a pheasant which had been scarcely touched.

‘I don’t care about other people’s leavings, sir,’ rejoined the man.

‘Then you are foolish,’ answered Morris, taking the bird and eating it eagerly.

He had had no breakfast, and was hungry.

After this hasty meal he looked round the cottage. On the table was an empty brandy bottle and an old almanack, the first leaf of which was torn out.

Hamley Morris took this almanack, put it in his pocket, and said to Dennis:

‘Come, let us be off.’

This excited the curiosity of his companion, but he did not dare to ask any questions.

Several fir plantations stretched away down past the Low Wood Farm to the main road.

At a short distance from the house, skirting one of these plantations, the heavy step of Daddy Chiverton could be seen firmly marked in the damp soil.

As our friend Chiverton is not at home he may be in the wood. Let us see,' said Hamley Morris.

For some distance they followed the footsteps, although Dennis was at a loss to divine why or wherefore. It was at times difficult to follow the tracks, but Morris seemed to have the eyes of a Red Indian for a trail, and did not once lose sight of it.

When he had gone about a league he stopped, and said to his companion :

'If we go straight on where shall we arrive after a couple more hours' walking?'

'At the main road,' answered Dennis.

'Good. On again.'

Their progress was necessarily slow, and nearly an hour elapsed before they reached a meadow which fringed the highway.

'It ought to be about here,' he said, abstractedly.

'What ought to be?' asked Dennis.

Morris did not answer him.

The sun was now rising, melting the frost which lay upon the ground, and its rays revealed a large stone under the hedge, upon which Daddy Chiverton had sat on the night preceding.

The mark of his feet in the soil were plainly to be distinguished; a few matches half burnt, and the ashes of a pipe lay not far off.

Sitting down on this stone, Morris looked through a gap in the hedge, and was able to see the road.

Speaking to Dennis, he said—

'Stroll about, and look right and left.'

'For what?' asked the man.

'A piece of paper with a hole in it.'

Almost as he spoke he saw a piece of paper lying on the grass.

It was ragged at the edges, as if torn, and had a hole in the middle.

He rose to pick it up.

The hole was that made by a bullet and the paper had, from its blackened appearance, served for wadding.

Dennis could resist no longer. His curiosity was devouring him, and he said—

'I beg your pardon, sir, but at the risk of offending you, I must ask you what it all means?'

'It means, my man, that the person who attempted to murder me last night sat on this stone, his pipe in his mouth, and his gun between his knees; when you and I passed he fired,' said Hamley Morris.

Taking the bit of paper, which had served as wadding, he unrolled it.

It was a printed paper, and in a corner were the words, 'New and Improved Almanack,' while farther down were the figures 13.

He drew from his pocket the old almanack which he had found on Daddy Chiverton's table.

The thirteenth page was missing.

'Look at that,' he said, putting it into the hand of his attendant.

'The wicked old wretch!' said Dennis. 'But why did he fire at you?'

'Because I know too much to be agreeable to certain parties,' was Hamley Morris's enigmatical answer.

'You'll have him up for it, sir?'

'He will be in custody in less than a week from this time.'

'Our superintendent at Stanton, Mr. Lee, is the man for you, sir,' said Dennis, proud of a local celebrity.

Hamley Morris made a contemptuous gesture.

'Mr. Lee would not put his hand on his shoulder in twelve months,' he said, with supreme disdain.

They walked back to the farm.

Hamley Morris went to his room, and soon appeared with a small carpet-bag.

'Put the horse to, Dennis, I want to go to the station,' he said.

'Yes, sir,' answered Dennis.

Soon everything was in readiness, and Dennis having put on his best coat, jumped up to drive to Stanton.

As they were going down the lane which led from the farm to the main road, they saw a man with a gun sauntering along.

It was Lord Cariston.

Darby turned round at the sound of the gig.

On recognising Hamley Morris he became very pale.

'Good morning, Mr. Chiverton,' said Morris, 'have you any message for your father? I shall see him in London, as I

shall make it my particular business to find out his whereabouts.'

'You are an insolent, upstart, scoundrel, sir,' answered Darby, furiously.

'Thank you,' answered Morris, with a laugh. 'You have described yourself exactly;' adding 'Drive on Dennis.'

If he had dared, Darby would have shot him dead, then and there, but he had a companion, and, after all, Darby, reckless as he might be, had a peculiar regard for his own neck.

'I don't like all this. There is something wrong,' he said to himself. 'I should feel more comfortable if I had Mona always by my side. I might do worse. She is very clever, and at all events I should not fall alone.'

He wavered on for some distance, occupied with his thoughts.

Looking up, he found himself on the outskirts of the property owned by Mr. Jonas Bloxam.

It was the usurer's custom to take a walk after breakfast.

He was thus occupied when he saw Darby advancing towards him, and he exclaimed, 'Ah, how do you do? We have not had the pleasure of meeting since your elevation to the peerage.'

'No,' answered Darby, drily.

The perspiration broke out on his forehead.

He thought of the terrible document which Mr. Jonas Bloxham held locked up in his strong box.

To tell the truth, Darby would as soon have met the prince of darkness face to face, as encounter Mr. Jonas Bloxam, the usurer.

CHAPTER X.

MARRIED.

THERE was an easy familiarity about Mr. Jonas Bloxam's manner which was anything but agreeable to Darby.

The usurer took his arm and walked about with him up and down the pleasant meadows, chatting about his elevation to the peerage, and the extraordinary luck which had attended his efforts to raise himself in the social scale, as Mr. Bloxam called the conspiracy which had dispossessed Ashley Leigh of his own.

Darby thought this would be a good opportunity to ask Mr. Bloxam for the dangerous and incriminatory document which he held in his custody.

He had long had a desire to do so, but he had put off the disagreeable task from day to day, he scarcely knew why.

'I am glad I have met you,' he said. 'For I wish to give you back your money, and get out of your debt.'

'With all my heart,' answered the usurer. 'Come with me into my house. We can soon settle our business.'

They turned their steps in the direction of the house, Darby saying that he liked to be on friendly terms with his neighbours.

'Yes,' replied Mr. Bloxam. 'It is always advisable to cultivate friendly relations with those in the same county with you; much that is agreeable or disagreeable depends upon it; but I am scarcely a fitting companion for your lordship.'

There was a slightly sarcastic emphasis on the word which was not lost upon Darby.

'That is all nonsense. You are as good as I am,' he said, with a laugh.

'You and I know that, but the people who look upon you as the veritable Lord Cariston——'

'So I am,' said Darby quickly.

'What about that little document which I have in my strong box?' asked the usurer, smiling blandly. 'That confession

in your own handwriting which proves you to be an impostor. What about that, eh, my friend ?

‘Surely, Mr. Bloxam,’ answered Darby, gravely, ‘you were not so foolish as to suppose that any reliance could be placed upon that ?’

‘Foolish—reliance—what do you mean ?’

‘I wanted money, and when a man is necessitous he will commit any act of folly to fill his pockets.’

‘Oh, that is it ?’

‘Certainly. I did it to humour you. It was absolutely necessary that I should have the money. You had your whim ; which was that I should place myself in your power, as you phrased it. To humour you, I made a confession, dictated by you ; but on my word of honour, there is no truth whatever in what I wrote on that sheet of paper. Burn it Mr. Bloxam, for it is not worth a penny-piece.’

Jonas Bloxam looked at Darby, with a twinkle in his cunning gray eye.

‘Do you think a jury would believe that, Darby Chiverton ?’ he exclaimed.

‘They could not help themselves.’

‘Stuff!’ cried the usurer ; ‘let us have none of this child’s play. I am a man of the world ; and a great criminal like you should have his wits about him. Sometimes I doubt whether you and your father could have got up this plot between you. There must have been an accomplice, and I ask myself who it is.’

Darby enjoyed the old man’s perplexity.

‘I suppose,’ he said, ‘you think you can insult those who are in your debt. Fortunately, I can now do without you, and when I have discharged my obligation to you, we shall meet on even terms.’

‘Here we are, come in, you know your way,’ said the usurer, throwing open the front door of his house.

Darby found himself ushered into the room he had been introduced into before. There was no alteration in its appearance. Taking up a pen, he drew a blank cheque from his waistcoat-pocket, and said carelessly.

‘What amount shall I fill it up for ?’

It was wonderful to see how easily Darby had adapted himself to the position of a man of fortune. There was very little refinement about him, but he, nevertheless, carried himself with some dash, and a certain knowledge of the world.

Jonas Bloxam leisurely unlocked his desk, and took from it the acceptance which Darby had given him, then placed it before him, and said :—

‘There are the figures.’

Darby filled up the cheque.

‘Now for the confession, as you call it,’ he said.

‘Give me the cheque,’ answered the usurer.

‘No, no. Both at the same time. I cannot trust you any more than you can me.’

Jonas Bloxam sat back in his chair, and very composedly said :—

‘That document, which will enable me to consign you to penal servitude, shall never go out of my possession. Please yourself about giving me the cheque ; all I can tell you is, if it be not handed to me, I shall place the matter in the hands of the police, and you may take the consequences.’

Darby quivered with rage ; this was succeeded by a violent trembling ; beads of perspiration stood on his forehead.

Jonas Bloxam regarded all these signs of trepidation with visible contempt.

What a terrible man the usurer was.

The country people had not exaggerated when they spoke of him as a man to be dreaded, One who would get the better of any half-dozen ordinary men.

‘Those who sup with the devil should have a long spoon,’ says the proverb.

Between his knees was his gun, and Darby seizing it with the rapidity of lightning, presented it at Jonas Bloxam.

‘Come!’ he said, ‘I don’t leave the house without that writing.’

The usurer remained perfectly unmoved.

‘It seems to me, my young friend,’ he answered, ‘that you will, under those circumstances, stay here a long while.’

‘How is that?’

‘I invariably keep important papers at my banker’s.’

Darby lowered his gun.

‘I insist upon examining your desk,’ he said.

‘As you please.’

Jonas Bloxam shrugged his shoulders, and pushed the desk over to him.

It was unlocked.

In vain Darby searched among its manifold contents for the precious document he so much wanted to get hold of.

It was not to be found.

'Are you satisfied now?' enquired the usurer.

Darby tore up the cheque he had written.

'No money,' he said, 'until that paper is forthcoming. I might as well be without the title and money, as live with a drawn sword over my head.'

'I will give you a week,' answered Jonas Bloxam. 'If you are obstinate at the end of that time, and blind to your own interests, I will give Lady Cariston some news for which she will be grateful.'

'And prove yourself an accessory after the fact,' retorted Darby.

The usurer had not given him credit for knowing so much law.

He gnawed his nether lip.

'That is nothing,' he said, with some decrease in his former confidence.

'Very well, we shall see,' replied Darby, oracularly; adding, 'Not a halfpenny without that document; never mind whether it be true or false, or whether I attach importance to it or not, I'll have it. Good morning.'

The usurer returned his salutation, and Darby, putting on his hat, left the house.

'Touch and go,' ejaculated Jonas Bloxam, when alone. 'I thought every minute he would have discovered the secret drawer. However, it is well, so far; though he is more difficult to work than I imagined. He will give way, I think, under a judicious system of terrorism. I must turn matters over in my mind. Who is his accomplice? That is what I should like to know.'

While Jonas Bloxam was plunged in deep thought, Darby wended his way to Heart's Content, shooting carelessly as he went along, and not taking the trouble to pick up his game when he had killed any.

He began to be conscious that the clouds were gathering around him, and a storm was brewing which would burst over his devoted head, unless he managed his affairs so well as to prevent it.

On his way to Heart's Content he looked in at his father's cottage, and found it deserted.

The mysterious hint which had been thrown out led him to believe that Daddy Chiverton had failed in his attempt to kill the stranger from London, as he called Morris.

Here was another enemy at large.

Darby felt the want of moral support more every hour.

Mona, with her strong will, great tact, real cleverness, and indomitable courage, would be a valuable helpmate indeed.

He resolved to stifle his love for Marian Ingledeu, and make Mona his wife.

That important step would conciliate one who might be a most formidable enemy.

With her judicious counsel at his back he might be able to fight against Hamley Morris and Jonas Bloxam. At all events, her interest would be identical with his own, and they would stand or fall together.

His reception was cold in the extreme.

Lady Cariston and Marian were in the drawing-room when he was announced, and they promptly quitted the apartment as soon as he entered, without taking the slightest notice of him.

This coolness annoyed him, and he vowed inwardly that he would be revenged, by letting the house to Captain Scudamore for a shooting-box, and turning them out, to go whithersoever they pleased.

He asked for Miss Seafield.

The domestic summoned her, and Mona, looking as queen-like as ever, walked into the room, and asked him what he wanted.

‘My object in coming to Heart’s Content is twofold,’ he said. ‘In the first place, Hamley Morris is alive, and has gone to London, to look for the old man, who, I suppose, has missed his aim. The affair has been bungled somehow; and the old man has left his cottage.’

‘What then?’ replied Mona, frigidly.

‘As for the other matter, it concerns you.’

‘Well!’

‘If you are still of the same mind, there is my hand; and I will go to church with you whenever you like,’ said Darby, bluntly.

‘Let me see,’ said Mona, ‘to-day is Friday. On Monday I will marry you privately at Stanton; that is to say, there shall be no parade, no public display; make your arrangements accordingly; and see about the licence, and all that.’

‘On Monday. Shall I come here for you?’

‘I will meet you in the church at half-past eleven.’

‘The parish church?’

‘Yes.’

Never perhaps was a marriage arranged in so cold and formal a manner between any two people.

When Darby looked at the magnificent creature before him; whose only fault was that she resembled a statue a little too much, he thought that she amply compensated for the loss of Marian.

Extending his hand to take leave, he said—

‘We may as well seal the compact with a kiss!’

She repulsed him, almost roughly.

‘You have no right to do that yet!’ she said.

‘I didn’t mean any harm,’ he answered, as he shrank back.

He was afraid of this woman.

‘Stop a moment,’ said Mona, as he neared the door.

‘Did you call me?’ he asked.

‘Yes. What is the amount of your income?’

‘Twenty thousand a year, Snarley tells me.’

‘Who is Snarley?’

‘The Stanton lawyer I have employed,’ answered Darby.

‘Some fellow who will rob you through thick and thin, I suppose?’ she said, with a sneer.

‘I don’t know. He got my father and I off for poaching very cleverly more than once, when the case was dead against us.’

‘Never mind that. Tell him to draw up deeds of settlement, giving me half your income!’ said Mona.

‘Half!’ ejaculated Darby, alarmed at the magnitude of the sum she asked for.

‘What is there to surprise you in that?’ she said quickly; ‘am I to have no compensation?’

‘For what?’

‘For marrying you, to be sure.’

Her tone was dreadfully satirical, and he winced under it.

‘After all, I——’

‘Don’t argue the point. Go and do as I tell you; and when the deeds are signed, let Snarley bring them here for my inspection. I must be protected.’

‘Very well. It shall be done,’ said Darby, seeing there was no help for it. ‘Now may I ask one thing in my turn?’ he added.

‘If you like,’ she replied, in a tone of supreme indifference.

‘Will you try to love me, Mona?’

‘I cannot make rash promises.’

‘Is that all you have to say to me?’ he queried, with a look of intense disappointment.

‘All!’

This monosyllable was a death-blow to his hopes. He knew from that moment that he should marry a woman, who, having a heart to bestow, would not give it to him; never would he enjoy its devotion. Its homage, its love, would all these be laid at the feet of another?’

Time would show.

When he went away, which he did immediately, he said to himself, ‘wait till she is my wife. I will tame her proud spirit for her, or break her heart in the attempt.’

The time between Friday and Monday elapsed very quickly. On Sunday, Mona, who had not been on very friendly terms with Marian, announced that she should leave Heart’s Content on the following day.

This announcement took Marian Ingledew by surprise.

They had been companions for so long a time, that she did not like the tie between them, such as it was, to be so rudely severed.

‘Is not your determination rather sudden?’ she asked.

‘It is rather so,’ was the unconcerned reply.

‘May I ask where you intend to go?’

‘By all means. I am going to be married.’

‘To be married! and to whom?’

Marian Ingledew stared at her governess with the utmost surprise.

‘To Lord Cariston.’

‘To that man! Oh, Mona, how can you, so proud, so refined, ever bring yourself to an alliance with such a person?’ exclaimed Marian.

‘That is my business,’ answered Mona, carelessly, as she walked to the window.

A proud sense of triumph swelled her bosom, as she reflected that she would soon gain the summit of her ambition.

She would, on Monday, become a peeress, and not only be the happy possessor of a coronet, but the mistress of vast wealth, such as she had dreamed of acquiring, when she fancied that there was a chance of Ashley Leigh making her his bride.

She was climbing up to the high position she coveted. It did not much matter who formed the ladder by which she attained the giddy eminence.

On the Monday she walked over to Stanton, and met Darby as appointed.

He had procured the licence, and they were married. After the ceremony they went to the castle, where a splendid breakfast was provided, and where Darby's new friends, the officers quartered at Stanton, and a few others, were assembled to meet her.

It was a mortification to her pride, however, to find that the only ladies who had been invited were the wives of Mr. Snarley, the lawyer, and one or two other men holding inferior positions in the town.

This was not the sort of society she desired, but she tolerated it for the time, and received the congratulations which were showered upon her with a calm dignity, which was habitual to her.

She was not dressed as a bride, having merely worn a black silk dress and a sealskin jacket, a present from Marian Ingledew, in the days of their intimacy. During the progress of the breakfast Captain Scudamore paid Mona marked attention.

He was very gentlemanly, in addition to being very handsome, and Mona showed herself flattered by his preference.

'Your regiment is expected to move soon, I believe,' she said.

'Yes, Lady Cariston,'—how delightful was the sound of the title to this unprincipled and ambitious woman. 'You have been correctly informed, but I am hopeful that I shall be a neighbour of yours, nevertheless.'

'Indeed,' she said.

'Yes. Your husband has kindly promised to allow me to rent his place called Heart's Content, which will make a capital hunting and shooting box. I shall sell my commission, for I am wretchedly tired of the army.'

'Would you like to live at Heart's Content?' asked Mona.

'Very much.'

'Consider that affair settled then,' she replied. 'I will take care that it is yours within a week.'

'Many thanks,' said Captain Scudamore, adding, 'Do not think I flatter you when I say that it has acquired an addi-

tional charm in my estimation since it will enable me to be so near yourself.'

Darby was treated by his wife as a cipher.

He saw her flirting with Captain Scudamore, and he did not like it, but to have remonstrated with her just then would, he knew, have been to make himself ridiculous, and have done as much good as trying to stem the advance of the tide with an empty barrel. A painful suspicion crossed his mind that his troubles were only just beginning.

He was soon to find that his suspicions were founded upon a substantial basis.

An overwhelming tide of trouble was beating up against him.

He had built his house on the sands—would it withstand the storm, when its foundations were shaken to their very base by the wind and the rain, and the furious floods which threatened it?

That was the question.

In the evening Darby's friends often came over to see him. On one occasion they sat round the fire smoking and drinking, telling stories and relating anecdotes of this, that, and the other.

Captain Scudamore gave his experience of the volunteers which he had joined as a young man before entering the army, and the story is worth preserving. It was as follows:—

A HERO ON SKATES.

Lord and Lady Linstock, a few years ago, gave invitations to a large circle of acquaintance to spend Christmas at their seat, Hadlow Castle.

Among the guests were Mr. and Mrs. Saville—City people of some renown in the commercial world—and with them came their son Mortimer and their daughter Felicia.

Mrs. Saville knew that Lord Linstock had borrowed money from the bank of which her husband was manager, and she rejoiced at being invited to Hadlow because she thought she might succeed in marrying her daughter to his lordship's only son.

The only son of Lord and Lady Linstock was named Valentine, but all his friends, by a strange perversion of nomen-

elature, preferred calling him the Honourable Orson, owing, perhaps, to their retentive memories reminding them of the fairy tale of Valentine and Orson.

The Honourable Valentine Bridgeman, son of Lord Linstock, and heir to his vast estates, was a young man of five-and-twenty, handsome, engaging in his manner, polished in his address, but extravagant to a degree, bearing a mountain of debt upon his shoulders, and going about in fear of his creditors.

He was the best rough-rider in the county. No one could equal him in going across country, and at all steeplechases the knowing ones invariably staked their money upon the success of the Honourable Valentine. His horses were worth fabulous sums; but though he had a fine collection of plates and cups which he had won, he might have bought them twenty or thirty times over for the money which he had lost.

When Mrs. Saville told her husband that they had a daughter to marry, she intended to convey to her slightly obtuse spouse that she had her eye upon somebody; and that somebody was no other than the Honourable Valentine Bridgeman.

She knew him by report to be an idle man, and, most decidedly, not a sort of person whom a judicious mother would choose for her daughter's husband.

At the age of eighteen to five-and-twenty a man may be sowing his wild oats, and there is a chance of reformation; but at the advanced age of thirty a man settles down, and accepts his characteristics in a fatalistic manner.

He seems to think that he has been endowed by nature with certain qualities. He may be weak, wicked, extravagant, idle, unambitious, a gambler, as well as a spendthrift, the possessor of more vices than virtues, but though fully conscious of his faults, he ceases to fight against them.

Valentine was at all times fonder of the stable than of the drawing-room: and had he lived in the days of Golden Ball Hughes, when it was the fashion to drive coaches, he would probably have devoted his existence to that inglorious pastime.

This was the man to whom the worldly and cupidinous Mrs. Saville proposed to unite her daughter! Poor Felicia! sensitive, exquisitely nervous, physically and mentally delicate to a degree, susceptible of the least impression, fond, devoted,

religious! What a life was before her if wedded to such a man!

Fortunately she was as yet unconscious of her mother's ambitious design, or she would have trembled for her future. Her heart was disengaged, but she had declared most solemnly to herself that she would never marry a man whose only qualifications were a handsome face, a polished and agreeable manner, and a fund of conversational nothings mixed with interesting small-talk.

If her heart could not follow her hand, she was firm in her determination that her hand should never go. Only to think of the bare idea of standing within the altar rails and vowing to love and obey—in all the simply solemn language of the rubric—a man for whom she had no sort of affection, was excruciating to her. There was something awful to her in the contemplation of it.

Mrs. Saville remarked with pleasure that the Honourable Valentine Bridgeman paid her daughter great attention. Mothers are good judges in such cases, and the one in question mentally came to the conclusion that it would end in a match.

Mr. Bridgeman took Felicia from the drawing-room to the dining-room, and talked to her in the most engaging manner. During dinner a band from a neighbouring town attended to play selections from various operas, which they did in a creditable manner, but this performance slightly interfered with the conversation. Whenever there was a break in the music the Hon. Valentine Bridgeman talked to Felicia.

“I am so grieved to hear that you think of leaving the castle, Miss Saville,” he exclaimed.

“Papa has business to attend to, you know,” she replied.

“Ah, to be sure! your father is a City man—a rich City man. City men always are rich as Jews—worth hundreds of thousands. No place like the City. I sometimes wish my father had brought me up to trade.”

“What trade?—that of dealer in horseflesh?” asked Felicia, who could not resist the temptation of making the remark.

“You are hard upon me,” exclaimed Valentine, looking straight at her. “It is scarcely fair to attack a man like that. I certainly am fond of horses; they are darling creatures, and

if I were to marry to-morrow, I should divide my love between my horses and my wife.'

'You mention your wife after your horses; that is an insult to the entire sex, and I shall have nothing more to say to you—not a word. Fancy, speaking of ladies and horses in the same breath, as if there were any comparison between them!'

Lady Linstock rose from the table, and gave a sort of masonic look to the ladies, which caused them to rise also, and they swept from the room.

When the ladies were gone, Mortimer Saville left his seat and took the chair his sister had lately occupied.

'I say, Saville,' exclaimed Valentine Bridgeman, 'is it really true that you go away to-morrow or the next day?'

'My leave's up,' replied Mortimer Saville. 'I shall be hauled over the coals at the Belligerent Office if I don't show up before the twentieth, and, as it is, I have taken all the leave I am entitled to. I shall have to grind all the rest of the year.'

'That's a bore! It is, by Jove! Why don't you go into the City?'

'Because I don't like it. The fact is, Bridgeman, I might go into the City and do well. My father has influence enough to get me five hundred a-year. At present I vegetate on a hundred and twenty, and draw on him for what I want besides; but I would rather be an ensign in a marching regiment, or a midshipman with nothing a-year, than a City man. I know it is foolish, but I cannot overcome my prejudices.'

'I have none of that pride about me,' replied Valentine. 'My only fault is a fondness for horses and a hatred of confinement. I could no more submit to confinement than I could fly. I should go mad if I were boxed up in Pall Mall the best part of a year, like you.'

As he spoke he took out his watch, looked at the time, and exclaimed—

'The Bardolph Bridge Volunteers come here to-night. I am captain of No. 2 company. Their head-quarters are at Bardolph Bridge. Some of the fellows hit upon a brilliant idea yesterday. We have kept it a secret from everybody. The frost has lasted so long that the ice bears splendidly, as, of course, you know. Well, Bardolph Bridge is two miles from here. We are three hundred strong, and we make four

companies. The fellows go to the stream near the bridge, put on their skates, and go along the ice till they come to the castle. They pile arms under the walls, and have torches given them, which they light and go round the moat in fours three times, then they fire a volley, and go with the band playing to the Esk, spin along to Wiston Reach, and come back to Hadlow to supper, which will be prepared for them in the banqueting room. What do you think of it?’

‘Capital idea,’ replied Mortimer. ‘The torches will have a very fine effect, and, as the moon is shining so brightly, the volunteers will look uncommonly well. Can all your fellows skate?’

‘Oh yes. We learn to skate down here as soon as we can walk almost. There’s nothing like a frost in our country to make us as jolly as sandboys.’

Valentine went away, accompanied by Mortimer Saville, and sought his apartments, where, with the aid of his servant, he donned his uniform, a grey, turned up with blue. It was pretty, if not striking.

The frost had lasted for a week with great severity, so that the ice was fully capable of bearing a large body of men. A thaw had commenced on the third day, but the wind chopped round to the east, again, and icicles hung from every bough. Spires of frost work, more delicate than the finest crystals, were to be seen on every blade of grass, and every one bowed before the terrible monarch, King Frost, who had asserted his sway in so marked and unmistakeable a manner.

The prospect of a torchlight journey to Wiston Reach, and a supper afterwards at the castle, was so alluring as to bring out the entire force of the regiment. They wore gaiters, but not their cloaks, as the exercise they were about to take would have been impeded by superabundant clothing.

It was rumoured that there would be a ball after the supper, but that was not generally credited, as only some dozen of Valentine Bridgeman’s particular friends were invited.

All at once the inspiring air for which the Bardolph Bridge Volunteers were famous, burst out upon the night, aided by the united efforts of two capital bands.

The windows of the castle rattled again as the music floated against them on the frosty atmosphere, and a servant entered the room and opened the shutters, so that the assembled company might see what was going on.

The volunteers had piled arms, and were standing in little knots, smoking and chatting merrily amongst themselves. They were a fine, hale, hearty body of men, inspirited by their two miles' run, and evidently enjoying their novel 'march out' considerably.

'Oh, this is charming, Lady Linstock!' cried Felicia, whose reserved and passive manner fled at the touch of a magician's wand. 'How delightful! So kind of you, to think of such a surprise! How can we thank you?'

Every one was equally enchanted.

'It is all Valentine's doing. It is Valentine's surprise, is it not, Mr. Saville?' exclaimed her ladyship. 'The ladies will have it, in spite of my asseverations, that I am the originator of the rendezvous; but you will come to my rescue, will you not?'

'With the greatest pleasure,' replied Mortimer. 'It is Bridgeman's idea, entirely, and he has sent word by me to ask if you would like to dress and come to the moat. You will see the men march past, and I really do think that it will be a sight well worth seeing. The moon is magnificent, and the ice as firm as a rock.'

Lady Linstock conversed in a low tone with several ladies who were standing round her, and at length the important question was settled.

'Oh! yes,' she replied. 'We should like it above all things. We will run and put our bonnets on. We must wrap up in plenty of grebe and sable this cold weather.'

When the ladies made their re-appearance, they formed quite a brilliant bevy, and the whole party descended the stairs leading to the court-yard of the castle, through which they passed, and going down a flight of steps, found a number of chairs placed for them at the base of the south tower.

The Volunteers were extended over a large space of ground. The colonel had thought it advisable not to crowd too many on one particular spot, so he had distributed them at certain distances.

The foremost batch were within a few yards of the ladies, and close to the bands, which were opposite the south tower.

The Hon. Valentine Bridgeman was in command of the fourth company, which was No. 1 on parade, and consequently marched first. The colonel, an old Indian and Crimean veteran, was talking to him.

The colonel, accompanied by Valentine, advanced to Lady Linstock, and shook hands with her in the most cordial manner.

‘You have quite stormed our castle, Colonel Forest!’ she exclaimed. ‘You must take care our artillery does not open fire, and send you all to the bottom of the moat.’

‘Oh! I have no particular fear of that. Your ladyship, have I your permission to give the word for the broken columns to reform? I do not wish to keep you in the cold longer than is absolutely necessary.’

‘When you please, colonel; we are all “your most obedient” to-night.’

The colonel saluted and wheeled round on his skates with admirable precision.

The Volunteers had all been supplied with lights by the servants of the castle; the word of command was given—they shouldered their rifles, formed fours, lighted their torches, and advanced at the double.

The effect was very fine.

The men skated with great rapidity, and passed three times before the party from the castle. As they held the torches they could not “present arms,” but they gave three cheers for Lord and Lady Linstock—three thundering cheers uttered by stentorian lungs; the noise drowned that of the bands, and the noble lord and his lady were much gratified.

Felicia, with two young ladies of her acquaintance, without saying a single word to any one, ran across the moat when the men came to the “halt,” intending to stand on the bank or upon the drawbridge.

Felicia was the leader in this act of secession, and she did not know that close to the edge of the moat the ice had been broken in order that the deer might be enabled to drink.

Hoarse cries of warning saluted her ears from the servitors were watching the scene from various ‘coigns of vantage,’ but she mistook their import. She imagined that the volunteers were again advancing on their way to the Esk, and she expedited her speed to get out of the way.

The consequence was that she stepped into an open space, and immediately sank in fifteen feet of water.

Cries of horror rent the air, for the accident was witnessed by all within fifty yards of the spot, but all seemed paralysed with astonishment.

A young man in No. 4 company, under the Honourable Valentine's command, darted forward, leaving the ranks without a word to any of his officers. The flambeau in his hand flared and sputtered as it was carried quickly through the air.

With great cleverness he arrested his precipitate progress at the very edge of the treacherous hole.

The young ladies who had accompanied Felicia were standing in the middle of the moat, rending the air with their screams.

The volunteer sank upon his knees, and as Felicia rose to the surface of the water, gasping and panting as if for dear life, he gently caught her by the shoulder, dragged her with some difficulty from her dangerous position, and laid her on the ice.

This act of gallantry was witnessed by more than a hundred of the company.

A tremendous burst of cheering rang pleasantly in the volunteer's ears, as aided by some gentlemen, he bore Felicia to the bank, and saw her carefully attended to.

Then, with a military salute to the party, amongst whom he alone knew Lord and Lady Linstock by sight, and to whom he was a perfect stranger, he wheeled round, saluted the Hon. Valentine Bridgeman, and took his place as a rear rank man in his company.

'Valentine,' exclaimed Lady Linstock, 'thank that young man, will you? He is very brave, and has saved poor dear Miss Saville's life. Ask him to the ball this evening. Felicia will be glad of having an opportunity of expressing her gratitude in person.'

'I intended to do so,' replied the Hon. Mr. Bridgeman. 'I fully intended doing so.'

'Well done, Fenwick. 'Pon my word, it was splendid. Lady Linstock has asked me to thank you for your bravery. There is to be a hop at the castle to-night. A carpet dance. Everything very quiet and private. I have asked a few men of 'ours.' Will you kindly join us? I can set you up in the way of pumps, or anything else you may want.'

'Is the uniform permissible?'

'Of course. Oh, yes, that will do,' replied Bridgeman, who raised his voice, and said: 'Now, you fellows, put those pipes out. We must be moving in the direction of Wiston Reach. 'Ten-tion! By your right—Mar-rah!'

The men were ready in an instant, and had less difficulty in starting than may be imagined.

The monotonous one—two, one—two of the sergeants, who generally mark time for the men in the beginning of a march, was not heard. The band was already in motion, and preceded the column. The men slung their arms, and consequently were able to carry their torches without inconvenience.

The smoke arising from the torches ascended and formed a dense cloud over the long line; but as the men swept past, to the number of three hundred, skating wonderfully well, and keeping abreast and in line with admirable precision, it was an imposing spectacle, and one which intensely gratified all who beheld it.

The party from the castle lingered until the last man was becoming dim, shadowy, and phantom-like in the darkness, and then retired to the drawing-room.

Felicia was not at all hurt. Her immersion was calculated to give her a severe cold, and she was advised to go to bed. This, however, she strenuously refused to do.

Changing her wet clothes, she descended to the drawing-room, and received the congratulations of her friends.

Her principal reason for coming down again, instead of retiring to rest, was an uncontrollable desire to see the handsome volunteer who had saved her life, if not at the risk of his own, at all events, at some danger to himself.

She thought that he was the handsomest man she had ever seen; and this hastily-formed opinion was confirmed when he entered the ball-room in the society of the Honourable Mr. Bridgeman, who took him to meet Felicia, saying—

‘Permit me, Miss Saville, to introduce full Private Maurice Fenwick to you.’

‘I feel deeply grateful to Mr. Fenwick for his great gallantry. I can never repay the obligation under which he has placed me,’ replied Felicia, in a deep, thrilling tone.

Her face was flushed, and she betrayed all the agitation of a school-girl.

‘Pray don’t mention it,’ said Maurice Fenwick; ‘I am only too happy to think that a fortunate chance enabled me to be of service to you.’

The orchestra now commenced a charming waltz.

‘May I have the honour?’ said Fenwick, addressing Felicia, who made a pretence of looking at her card.

She had purposely left the first dance open.

She bowed an assent, and the next minute Maurice Fenwick was whirling her lightly round the room.

Mrs. Sandford Saville was standing by the side of Lady Linstock as Felicia and her partner swept past.

‘Dear me!’ she exclaimed, ‘who is that young man with whom Felicia is dancing?’

‘I really don’t know; but here is Valentine—he will tell us.’

‘Some friend of his, I presume,’ returned Lady Linstock.

‘Who is my daughter’s partner, Mr. Bridgeman? Can you kindly tell me?’ said Mrs. Saville.

‘Fenwick—Maurice Fenwick,’ replied the Hon. Mr. Bridgeman.

‘Ah, yes: but what is he?’

‘Oh! I beg your pardon. As well as I can remember, he is—yes, he is the son of the village apothecary.’

Mrs. Saville looked in an infuriated manner at everybody, and sank into a chair. The idea of her daughter dancing with the son of a village apothecary, when there were three guardsmen, two baronets, and a host of well-bred, well-educated men in the room.

Oh, it was too monstrous, too preposterous, for any mother’s feelings!

For some time after that eventful night Felicia did not meet Maurice Fenwick, but the impression he had made upon her was never effaced.

Valentine paid her great attention, but she checked him at once, and told him frankly she could not love him.

In time Maurice came to London and contrived to meet Felicia. As it was impossible to gain the consent of her worldly-minded mother to their union, the lovers agreed to elope, and did one morning run away and get married.

For some time they lived in poverty, which was lightened by their mutual affection. At length they were forgiven, for both Mr. and Mrs. Saville really loved their daughter, and no one could say anything against Maurice Fenwick, who, under his father-in-law’s patronage, rose in the world, and was in time promoted to a position of trust and emolument.

After this, the lawyer who was Darby’s great ally, narrated an experience of his own which showed the result of sending a telegram. He called it:—

AT CROSS PURPOSES.

George Manvers, a London detective, went in the autumn of 185—, to the little town of E——, on the South coast, to arrest an absconding banker, but on his arrival he was unable to identify the gentleman, and he was obliged to telegraph to a Mrs. Bardell, with whom he was on intimate terms, and in whose house the banker had lived.

Worthy Mrs. Bardell no sooner received the telegram than she went round the corner to show it to her bosom friend Mrs. Chintop, who was, like herself, a lodging-house keeper.

Her calling and condition in life is not mentioned to prejudice the reader against the lady. It is simply stated as a matter of fact, which should be understood for the proper development of the story. Dr. Johnson was once asked who a gentlemen to who he had been talking was, and he replied that he had no wish to calumniate any one, but it was his private opinion that the man was an attorney.

We repeat, Mrs. Chintop was a lodging-house keeper. She let her parlours, her first floor front and back, and also her second floor, vegetating herself in some mysterious attic or sky parlour, where the twittering of that unique bird the London sparrow was distinctly audible early in the morning, and, to speak the truth, at other hours also.

The kitchen was Mrs. Chintop's favourite place of abode. It was in this subterranean region that she held converse with Mary Jane, and manipulated the cold meat of the lodgers, cutting off a morsel here, and snipping off a little bit there, in places where it wouldn't be seen, doing it all *more suo*, in a way that defied imitation.

An excellent woman was Mrs. Chintop, and, according to Mary Jane, the very best of mistresses. Mrs. Bardell and Mrs. Chintop loved one another like two sisters when together, but behind one another's backs abused each other like wild cats. Mrs. Chintop would write to her friend in this way, with a lead pencil on a scrap of paper: 'Do, dear, come to supper. The first floor's got tripe.' And Mrs. Bardell would return the compliment by writing: 'Dear friend, you must contrive to run over for an hour about nine. The parlours has salmon and cucumber—prime cut cut of the middle of the fish, and quite a picture to look at,

I do assure you : with cold lamb—shoulder, my dear—and pickles to follow ; with Stilton, sent up from Staffordsbire as a present but yesterday.' Thus would the hospitality of the one be reciprocated by the other. Happy friendship ! Envious intimacy ! Blissful union !

When Mrs. Bardell arrived with a sharp rat-tat at Mrs. Chintop's door, Mary Jane opened the door, and said, ' Lor ! is it you, mum ? Missis will be glad. The drawing-room has gone out for the day, and left the keys, and missis says the sherry wine's first-rate.'

Mrs. Bardell nodded significantly, and passed upstairs into the drawing-room. It was then half-past nine. The telegram, as is usual in some cases, had not travelled much quicker than an ordinary letter. Mrs. Chintop was dressed in a faded brocaded silk, and wore a cap which would have become a younger woman. She was sitting on a chair near an open cheffonier, and holding a glass of wine in the air, regarding it with the air of a judge ; her attitude resembling that of the person in the cheap wine merchant's circular, who shuts one eye, and exclaims, ' What ! South African ?'

' Isn't it odd to think as you should pop in promiscuous ?' said Mrs. Chintop. ' If there's anything going on I always says to Mary Jane, says I, " Mark my words, Sarah will run round as sure as there's omnybusses running about the streets ;" and so it's true, my dear. And now, what's the best news with you ? Nobody ain't been and left you a legacy, I don't suppose. But before you talks take a taste of this sherry wine. It ain't bad, though not my sort. I, liking plenty of body and a fuller flavour, not being set upon your Montillardos and your Vina di Pastas, and other long names which they give those dry wines, which is but the ghosts of wines.'

' So, your lodgers have gone out ?' replied Mrs. Bardell, drinking the sherry with gusto. ' Ain't it a blessing when they take themselves off, and lets you go into your own again, as I may say ? I always looks upon lodgers as people who ain't got no sort or manner of right in your house, and feel as if I could treat 'em according, hating them like poison all the while I'm saying, " Yes, mum," and " No, Sir."'

' Ah ! you and I was made for one another, Sarah,' said Mrs. Chintop, ' for them's my sentiments to a T. My drawing-rooms is underlet, as you know, I wanting thirty-five shillings

and only getting thirty ; but, take my word for it, they have to pay for it, and it comes dearer to them in the end, though they are that close and mean that they would not leave a cheeseparing, much less a drop of beer at the bottom of the glass, and drink's fourpenny 'arf-and-'arf, which ain't the sort of thing for them as calls themselves gentlefolks, such drinking Bass's bitter, and never missing a bottle when its took out of the cellar negleekful.'

'That's bad,' said Mrs. Bardell, sententiously. 'Give 'em notice, my dear, you'll let again directly. But listen to me. I've got a telegram.'

'A what?'

'Why, a message. You know it comes along them wire things, and is drove by electricity. Don't you know those boys in the street, with white round their caps. Well they brings 'em to you, and there's sixpence to pay.'

'And what is it about?' inquired Mrs. Chintop, whose lot it had never been to receive a telegraphic message.

'Why, I've got to go down to E—— to see a gentleman as used to have my parlours—a detective he is. He don't say what he wants, nor does he send the money to pay the fare ; but I shall go, and I've just stepped round to ask you to mind my place, and look after my slut of a girl, which the trouble she gives me you'd never believe ; and eating the cheese like a wolf when my back is turned, and she thinks I aint a looking at her. She got a lump—ah ! as big as an egg—stuck in her throat the other night, and would have choked her had it not been for me slapping her on the back, and says I, "Jane, all this comes of your gluttony. Now, what is it you've got inside of you ? for it's something more than mortal. Did you—now answer me true—did you, when a girl in the country, ever drink water out of a pond ? cos it's my firm belief you've got a eel." "A what, mum?" she says, turning as pale as a sheet, and looking at me with all the eyes in her head. "Why, a eel," I says again ; and then she sets to and begins to cry awful, and off she goes to a doctor, and he says he don't know nothing about eels, but he give her some stuff, though it aint done her a bit of good, as I'm a living witness that she eat half a quartern loaf for supper last night ; and no girl as hadn't got a eel could do that.'

'Ah !' said Mrs. Chintop, 'I feel for you, my dear. It's wonderful what them country gals do eat. I never takes no

teetotalers into my service. Water makes the gals so precious hungry, they eat you out of 'ouse and 'ome. Them as takes their beer regular, and don't mind a taste of Old Tom, gets nourishment from the drink, and ain't a tenth of the hexpense the other artful hussies is. If that girl of yours was mine, I'd start her pretty quick. I wouldn't keep no servant what drinks water, and as got a eel.

'I may rely upon you keeping a heye upon 'Liza Jane?'

'You may, my dear.'

Mrs. Bardell had a great idea of keeping a 'heye' upon people. She was always keeping a 'heye' upon some one or other, and felt quite satisfied when Mrs. Chintop promised to keep a 'heye' upon Eliza.

'Do you know what I'm a thinking?' said Mrs. Chintop, winking and blinking at the sherry like an owl in the moonlight.

Mrs. Bardell did not know, but she hazarded a guess.

'You're a thinking about having a sheep's head for dinner?'

'No, I ain't.'

'Then you're thinking about rump steak and hyster sauce, or biled mutton and capers, with turnips mashed?'

'No. It ain't wittles, my dear, I'm a thinking of,' responded Mrs. Chintop with a grave shake of the head.

'What is it, then?' asked Mrs. Bardell, desperately.

She spoke savagely, and glared viciously at her uncommunicative friend.

'It's your telegraphic message.'

'And what of it?'

'Do you know what he wants you for?'

'No. I wishes I did.'

'He's young, aint he?'

'Not quite a chicken, my dear.'

'And used to be partial to you?' asked Mrs. Chintop, pursuing her examination with the air of an Old Bailey lawyer, or a *nisi prius* barrister in a breach of promise case.

'Well, I—I really can't say,' responded Mrs. Bardell, simpering and trying to blush, but failing ignominiously, as no increase of colour would come to her cheeks.

In fact the good lady's nose had done all the blushing for her cheeks for a long, long time, and even her best friends admitted that she was afflicted by a determination of the blood to the tip of the nasal organ.

‘Sarah!’ cried Mrs. Chintop, sternly.

‘My dear.’

‘Don’t you have no secrets from your buzzim friend. Haven’t we been like sisters ever since we’ve been neighbours? You speak up and tell the truth. He *was* partial to you, and it’s no good your denying it.’

‘Well, my dear,’ said Mrs. Bardell, ‘it isn’t for me to speak, though I may say that I—I thought—that is, I had reason to suppose that—that it might come to something some day.’

‘That’s it—that’s what I wanted to come to. Now, I’m not often wrong, Sarah; but you take my word for it, that he’s going to make you a hoffer—don’t say no. I know it, he’s going to make you a hoffer.’

Mrs. Bardell played with the fringe on her shawl, and with a deep-drawn sigh, said—

‘Bardell always did say he knew I shouldn’t be a widder long.’

‘And he was right. The young man knows you are clever, and he wants some one to keep him company. He’s lonely, and you being what I may call the friend of his youth, has a special attraction in his heyes, and you’ll be Mrs. — what’s his name?’

‘Manvers,’ softly murmured the interesting widow.

‘Mrs. Manvers. A pretty name, and one you’ll bear as graceful as becomes you. Now, shall I tell you what I’d wear in church?’ said Mrs. Chintop.

Mrs. Bardell nodded her head affirmatively.

‘Well, I’d wear a white glacé silk with tulle trimmings.’

‘Yes, yes,’ cried Mrs. Bardell, delightedly. ‘But wouldn’t a white satin or a white moire do better? It looks more rich. There was Mrs. Platterskin, the publican’s widder, at the Grapes, you know, she wore a white satin when she married the grocer.’

‘So she did, my dear, and I ain’t going to say nothing against morrys,’ replied Mrs. Chintop. ‘Morrys is capital wear, and always looks like having pounds about you. Of course there’ll be a breakfast. I should get the cake from the fountain-head, and go to Gunter’s, even if it do cost a trifle more.’

‘Yes, we’ll have a cake for a queen, and you shall come with me and horder the shampain, and we’ll taste lots of bottles till we get the best,’ replied Mrs. Bardell, who allowed

her friend to persuade her that she was really the object of Manvers' adoration.

'You must be missis, my dear,' said Mrs. Chintop, with the air of a mother, talking to a daughter, on the eve of marriage.

'Never fear. It's a woman's privilege to govern her husband. Bardell always had to own that he was only a lodger.'

'And don't you stand no birthdays.'

'Not I.'

'And no clubs.'

'No.'

'Or public-'ouse parlours; nor no bagatelle-boards. They're the ruin of 'arf the 'usbans.'

'So they are, my dear,' replied Mrs. Bardell.

'And don't you let him make no eyes at no women. It ain't right. Choose your company, and be particular over your servants. A plain gal as has got a eel is better than one as is pretty.'

'You're right there, my dear. I fancy I see anything of that sort a taking place. I'd limb her. I'd be the death of the pair of them, I would.'

'Of course you'll have a carriage to go to church in?'

'In course.'

'Don't you think,' continued Mrs. Chintop, 'that bays is better than chesnuts?'

'I likes greys.'

'Very well, 'ave greys. I ain't got nothing to say against greys, but chestnuts I do abominate. You'll live in a haristic part of the town—somewhere down the Kensington Museum way; that's where the pick and the cream of the hupper classes lives.'

'Is it? I'll be guided by you, my dear.'

'Then you won't go wrong,' replied Mrs. Chintop.

The worthy couple replenished their glasses, and drank the wine slowly, as if they were desirous of tasting its flavour. Mrs. Chintop looked earnestly, not to say searchingly, at her friend, and said, with a deep-drawn sigh—

'Sarah!'

'Mum, to you,' was the reply.

'You'll be forgetting all your old friends; you'll never think of poor old Chintop. You'll be calling of us vulgar

creatures, and be too proud to know any but carriage company.'

'If I do I wish I may drop,' said Mrs. Bardell. 'No; whatever 'appens to me—and we're all in the hands of fate—I shall never forget old frens, more espeshall Mrs. Chintop, which shall always be welcome as a 'onnered guest.'

'Which it's kind of you to say it,' said Mrs. Chintop. 'Youre ar.'s in the right place, Sarah, and I wish you luck! Bless you! May you be 'appy! You've got a trying time before you, my dear, but your spirit will sustain you. Do your duty to him, but keep him under, and you'll be all right. God bless you! Send for a four-wheel cab, and I'll go to the station with you.'

Mrs. Chintop squeezed out a tear, and suppressed a sob, and Mrs. Bardel, taking advantage of her friend's abstraction, drank three glasses of sherry, one after the other, which caused her nose to flame brightly like a burning beacon.

It was just one o'clock when Mrs. Bardell reached E——. The town was familiar to her, and she walked from the station to the hotel.

That interesting official, the town crier, was exercising his lungs, and informing the public that the principal baker of the place had lost his keys, and could not open the oven-door, and would pay half-a-crown for their restoration; which munificent offer met with no immediate response.

She found the hotel, and raising the knocker with a fluttering heart, gave three timid knocks in slow succession.

A waiter admitted Mrs. Bardell, and showed her into the parlour, as the best room in an inn in country places is called. In a short time Manvers made his appearance, looking a little wild and excited.

'This is kind of you,' he said. 'I scarcely expected you so soon.'

'Oh! Mr. Manvers, I would do anything to oblige you, as you know. I had no sooner received your telegram than I hurried and flustered myself to answer you.'

'And, I presume, you are anxious to know why I summoned you to E——?'

'I—I think I can guess,' replied Mrs. Bardell.

'Can you, indeed? Then I give you credit for more cleverness than——'

‘I was always clever,’ interrupted Mrs. Bardell. ‘You must remember that you always gave me credit for being clever.’

‘That is perfectly correct,’ said he. ‘I did so; and I hope that you will be of some service to me. Do you remember a banker lodging in your house?’

‘You mean Mr. Benson?’

‘Yes.’

‘I should think I did! I hear he’s run away, Mr. Manvers. It is a sad, sad thing.’

‘Do you think you would be able to recollect the features of the man who had your drawing-rooms?’

‘I am sure I should,’ replied Mrs. Bardell. ‘I never liked that man, and I took particular care to look at him and observe his features narrowly.’

‘Are you sure you could recognise him?’

‘I would stake my life on it,’ replied Mrs. Bardell, emphatically.

‘Very well. I will take you to him, for it is necessary that you should identify him.’

‘Is that *all* you telegraphed to me for?’ cried Mrs. Bardell, with a slight cry.

‘All! Mrs. Bardell. What do you mean?’

‘Is it *all*?’

‘Of course it is. Could I have communicated with you on a matter of greater importance?’

‘I—I—don’t know,’ replied Mrs. Bardell, ready to cry with vexation.

She had fallen into the trap laid for her by Mrs. Chintop, and she was disappointed in the extreme to find that there was no foundation whatever for the suspicion that Manvers was in love with and wanted to make her an offer.

She could have fallen upon him and made a ferocious attack upon his hirsute appendages, beginning with his whiskers and ending with his moustaches, but she forbore to indulge in so violent an amusement.

‘I wish you, Mrs. Bardell,’ he exclaimed, ‘to have the goodness to accompany me to an hotel in this place, when I think I shall be able to show you the man. Will you comply with my request? If you will, I shall be eternally indebted to you.’

Mrs. Bardell was unable to reply for a short time; the

reaction was too great for her. She had been upon the pinnacle of hope, and she was cast down into the abyss of despair. At length there crept into her mind a little furtive hope that he might love her, and have it in his mind to propose after a time. So she smiled, and tried to be affable.

She had heard of ladies who were fascinating, and who had exercised their arts in a most wonderful manner upon those of the opposite sex. If so, why should she not be fascinating, as well as others?

There were syrens who charmed Ulysses. Had the daughters of Eve degenerated? It was to be hoped not. Whatever happened she must contrive somehow to enchain the sympathies of Manvers, or else she could never—never face Mrs. Chintop again. She must either marry him or give up her house, sell her furniture, and migrate to a part of the town where she was not known.

This was anything but an agreeable conclusion to arrive at. If there is one thing which an elderly widow abhors more than another it is ridicule. Hoping for the best, she stifled her emotion, and replied—

‘Is it possible, sir? If he is in this town I do hope that he’ll be punished, for a more cruel and rascally thing never yet happened in this wicked world. I’ll do all I can to help you to identify him, and think it a pleasure.’

‘Thank you,’ said he, quietly. ‘I knew I could rely upon you. We will now, if you please, go to the hotel.’

‘Certainly, sir.’

The ‘Crown’ was about five minutes’ walk from Manvers’ inn, and he offered Mrs. Bardell his arm when they entered the street. This condescension quite charmed the worthy woman, and all she wished was that Mrs. Chintop could be at E—— to witness the dignity to which she had arrived; to take a man’s arm in the street is so like being his wife that she began once more to believe in the realization of her dream.

How very quickly that five minutes passed! She could have wished the walk to last for a lifetime; but earthly bliss is transitory, and lodging-house-keeping widows are no more than mortal.

Mr. Benson was in the coffee-room, where he found a repast prepared for him by Mr. Drowsy, the host, who did his best to do honour to his guest.

Manvers did not take Mrs. Bardell into the room as if she were a detective. He said to her, 'Peep in at the door, and if you think you can recognise the man tell me so.'

Had Mrs. Bardell been imbued with half his discriminating penetration she would not have betrayed herself into the egregious blunder which put the banker upon his guard.

No sooner had she looked in at the door and seen him than she exclaimed, in a loud voice, which was distinctly heard by him to whose ear the remark should not have penetrated.

'That's him, Mr. Manvers! That's the man! I know him again in a minute. I'll swear to him in any court of justice. That's him, Mr. Manvers! You're quite right, sir. He's the man that took my lodgings.'

Mr. Benson looked in the direction from whence this voice proceeded, and though Manvers pulled Mrs. Bardell back as quickly as he could, he caught sight of her.

Manvers no sooner had an opportunity of speaking to Mrs. Bardell than he exclaimed—

'How imprudent you are!'

'Me, sir?' she said, in a tone of surprise.

'Yes. Your impetuosity ruins all. If you had only held your tongue the man would not have been put upon his guard. I am afraid that we shall have some trouble with him now.'

'Can't you give him in charge, now?' asked Mrs. Bardell.

'I must go with you to the police-station, and very likely we shall be required to make a deposition before a magistrate. During the hour or two this will occupy our bird will, in all likelihood, slip through our fingers.'

'But we shall find him again, sir?'

'We will exert ourselves to do so. Now, come with me. We will take a drive and see what is to be done.'

They went to the police-station, and Manvers told his tale to the sergeant on duty. It was an extraordinary charge, and one the sergeant had some difficulty in believing; but, at last, he was so impressed with Manvers' earnest manner and apparent truthfulness that he was induced to think there was some ground for the charge which he made against the banker.

Some people find it hard to believe anything alleged against a rich man. There seems to be an innate feeling of toadyism in most Englishmen and women's breasts, and the sergeant was no exception to the general rule.

The good worthy man would have believed anything bad of Brown, Jones, or Robinson, and have taken Smith in charge upon the flimsiest pretence and insufficient evidence ; but when he heard that a banker was accused of committing a crime he hesitated in crediting it.

Manvers, however, though not a man well known in detective or police circles, held a good position in his profession, and a charge made by him could not be disregarded.

The sergeant would not grant a warrant upon his own responsibility. He insisted upon having a deposition made upon oath before a magistrate.

Mr. Manvers was much disgusted at the man's obstinacy, and endeavoured to remonstrate with him, but without avail.

'I very much regret, sir, that I cannot do as you wish,' said the sergeant. 'Nothing would give me more pleasure than to oblige you, but this is a charge of a serious nature. It is made against a gentleman of reputation, and I cannot act upon my own responsibility.'

'But I will hold you harmless.'

'Thank you, sir, but I very much regret that I must refuse to act summarily.'

'What course am I to pursue, then?'

'I will accompany you to the justices' room at Rockfort, where you will find either Mr. Hale or Mr. Baylis, and when they have heard what you and the lady with you have had to say, they may grant you a warrant or not, as they see fit.'

'This is excessively tiresome.'

'Sorry for it, sir.'

'Possibly,' said Manvers, testily ; 'but your sorrow will not mend matters. Send one of your men for a fly, please, and tell him to get the likeliest horse he can see, as I want to get over the ground quickly.'

'Very well, sir.'

The sergeant disappeared, and turning to Mrs. Bardell, Manvers exclaimed—

'What geese these country policemen are! If we had only been in London this delay would not have occurred.'

'No, Mr. Manvers, that it wouldn't. The police in London will take a charge against any one, be he rich or be he poor. To my mind, they are a little too fast in taking charges, and if I had the power I'd get a hact of Parliament to stop 'em.'

The fly was not long in making its appearance. Manvers

handed in Mrs. Bardell, and the sergeant rode on the box with the driver.

Rockfort was two miles distant. The road was indifferent, and, in spite of Manvers' admonition, the horse was the veriest screw of a Rosinante that ever ran between shafts. It seemed all legs and wings, and had evidently been a stranger to oats from its infancy.

E—— was in the parish of Rockfort—and consequently all the judicial business was transacted there. The E—— people were actually buried at Rockfort, it having no graveyard or cemetery of its own.

Fortunately they found a magistrate at Rockfort—had they been half-an-hour later his worship would have taken his departure. He had enjoyed the felicity of committing two men to prison for a month with hard labour, for stealing a couple of turnips in a field through which they were passing; and he had given a gipsy a fortnight for being a tramp and sleeping under a hedge, because he hadn't halfpence enough to pay for a threepenny bed in the village.

Such was the wisdom of this rustic Solon.

When the detective and Mrs. Bardell were ushered into the justice-room, Mr. Baylis took them for prisoners. He was rather in a hurry, because his gamekeeper was waiting for his return home to draw a badger, his worship being extremely partial to a good badger bait.

'Well, Jarvis,' he exclaimed to the sergeant, 'what's the charge? Make haste, my good fellow. A magistrate's time must not be trifled with. I am always at the service of the State, but not being a stipendiary I cannot be kept here all day.'

'It's a charge of murder, sir,' replied the sergeant.

'Eh! what?' cried Mr. Baylis, looking intensely surprised.

'Murder, sir!'

'God bless me! are they both concerned in it? Make out the commitment. No—stay; let me hear the evidence first, let me hear the evidence first, eh, Jarvis—better hear the evidence; or would you like a remand? Better remand them for a week, I think, and take bail in two sureties of five hundred each. What do you say to that? Full bench this day week, you know.'

'Beg your pardon, sir,' said the sergeant, 'you've made a mistake.'

‘Made a mistake!’ cried Mr. Baylis, getting red in the face. ‘What the dev—that is, what do you mean, sir? I never made a mistake since I’ve been in the commission of the peace.’

‘If you will allow me, sir, I think I can explain the matter to your satisfaction,’ exclaimed Manvers, smiling, although he was burning with vexation.

‘Hold your tongue, prisoner,’ said Mr. Baylis.

‘But——’

‘Jarvis!’

‘Sir.’

‘Has the prisoner been cautioned?’

‘You don’t understand, sir.’

‘What! don’t talk to me in that way!’ shouted Mr. Baylis; ‘a policeman to tell a magistrate he doesn’t understand. Monstrous! I never heard of such a thing. I ask you if the prisoner has been cautioned in the usual way, and told that “everything he says will be used in evidence against him.” Must proceed in the usual way, you know. Things must be done regularly.’

‘He isn’t a prisoner at all, sir.’

‘Not a prisoner! then what did you bring him here for?’

‘He’s come to make a charge, sir.’

‘Oh! I perceive. It’s the woman who is the culprit. Separate them, and place her in the dock.’

‘Woman, indeed!’ said Mrs. Bardell, indignantly; ‘let him try and place me in the dock—let him so much as lay his little finger upon me, and if there’s law to be had in England for money, I’ll make him pay for it!’

‘What—what is the meaning of this?’ asked Mr. Baylis, driven to his wits’ end. ‘I must confess that I am altogether at a loss.’

‘If you would allow me, sir, I could make everything clear,’ exclaimed Manvers.

The magistrate nodded his head, giving the required permission.

‘I apply for a warrant against Mr. Benson, for the murder of a female under the following circumstances.’

He then went into minute details, to which the magistrate listened with manifest impatience. He was hungry and thirsty, and above all things wished to enjoy the treat of seeing the badger drawn. All at once a quick way of getting

out of the difficulty of being obliged to listen to Manvers and Mrs. Bardell occurred to him, and he exclaimed—

‘Very well, Mr. Manvers, you need not say anything more. You have told me who you are, and being a person of respectability, I have no hesitation in granting you the warrant you ask for. You must pardon the little confusion which took place when you first made your appearance; but the sergeant, although a very worthy man and an excellent officer, is not quite so skilful in stating a case as he ought to be.’

‘Don’t mention that,’ replied Manvers, ‘I have your permission to take a warrant?’

‘You have. Jarvis!’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Make it out at once, and go yourself and see it executed.’

‘What about bail, sir, if he should offer to put it in?’ asked the sergeant.

‘Oh! two sureties in—say eight hundred each, and himself in three thousand, eh? That, I think, will meet the justice of the case.’

‘Any notice, sir?’

‘No, no notice; I wouldn’t keep him in gaol longer than can be helped.’

This ended the sitting, and the magistrato retired, shortly afterwards issuing from the private door, and getting into his carriage to go home and draw the badger.

Such is the free-and-easy way in which justice is administered in some of the rural districts of England.

No sooner had Manvers obtained the warrant than he jumped into the fly, and told the driver to drive as quickly as possible. He went as fast as his horse would go, but the pace even then bore some resemblance to the rate of progression customary among the snail and tortoise tribe.

A good half hour elapsed before they drew up at the door of the ‘Crown.’

Manvers sprang out, and meeting the landlord in the passage, asked for Mr. Benson. The landlord thought a moment, and replied—

‘He has been gone out about an hour; he paid his bill, and begged me to thank you for your attention. I was to be particular about remembering the word “attention.”’

‘Where has he gone?’

‘That I don’t know.’

‘Did he walk?’

‘He did, sir.’

Turning to Mrs. Bardell, Manvers, with a lugubrious air, exclaimed—

‘Too late—too late!’

‘Why so?’ she asked.

‘He has gone.’

‘Follow him, then.’

‘How can that be done when we don’t know where he has gone?’

‘If I might presume to offer an opinion, sir,’ said the sergeant, ‘I should say that he has gone to the railway station. It is now half-past five—the express has been gone half an hour. If we go to the railway we can work the telegraph, and do some good with it.’

‘A capital idea!’ cried Manvers, cheerfully. ‘To the station at once, then. Mrs. Bardell——’

‘Sir, to you.’

‘We can dispense with your services for the present. You must be tired. Will you kindly stay until my return? Have the best dinner the place affords, and consider yourself my guest.’

‘Thank you, sir. I shall have much pleasure in taking some dinner. Shall you be long?’

‘That depends upon circumstances.’

Shaking hands with Mrs. Bardell, Manvers proceeded with the sergeant to the railway station. Jarvis was well acquainted with the telegraph clerk, and they went into his private room.

‘Good day, Mr. Jarvis. What can I do for you, sir?’ said the clerk.

‘We have a warrant for the arrest of a gentleman whom we suspect has gone to London by the five o’clock express.’

‘Very well. You want him stopped, I suppose, and sent back.’

‘We do.’

The clerk went to the telegraphic apparatus, and began to work it. The sharp click of the machinery was heard. He stopped and looked at the dial. His message was being answered.

Rapidly the needle went from side to side. Now here, now

there, but swiftly as it moved his experienced eye followed it.

‘All right!’ he exclaimed; ‘the express has not reached T—— yet, although it is expected in ten minutes. Now, gentlemen, is your time. Show me your warrant, and give me a description of the person you want apprehended. I will transmit it to the officials at T——, and your man will be stopped to a certainty, and brought back by the train which arrives here at 8.15.’

In a few words as possible Manvers described Mr. Benson, and then the clerk went again to his instrument, and worked away with a will. The silent voice of the electric wire spoke to the official at T——, and he answered to the effect that he understood and would act promptly.

The next quarter of an hour was passed by Manvers in a state of feverish anxiety.

Very quickly revolved the electric needle. Manvers watched its revolution patiently, but did not interrupt the operator by useless questions or needless remarks. Some time elapsed; then the telegraph clerk looked up with a smile of satisfaction, and exclaimed,—

‘The person for whose arrest you have a warrant has just been taken out of a first-class railway carriage, and is in the charge of the police! He declares his innocence, and is very violent and indignant. He will be brought on here, by the next down train.’

‘Thank you!’ said Manvers, with a sigh of relief. ‘I am excessively obliged for the promptitude with which you have acted.’

‘Not at all, sir,’ replied the clerk. ‘I have simply done my duty. Is there any other way in which I can be of service to you?’

‘Not at present,’ Manvers answered, leaving the office, accompanied by Jarvis.

When they reached the outside of the station, they walked up and down under a narrow canopy, without speaking, until Jarvis exclaimed, ‘I beg your pardon, sir; but what is to be done now?’

The detective started, and, stopping in his walk, replied, ‘I have nothing more to do at present. The prisoner will arrive here in a few hours. It will be your business to meet him at the station and see him safely lodged in gaol at Rockfort. I

shall attend and give evidence before the bench of magistrates when required. Be very careful with your prisoner, and, above all things, don't let him escape.'

'Trust me for that,' replied the policeman, with a confident air.

He was an officer of some standing in the force, and the idea of any prisoner placed in his charge escaping seemed so utterly and completely ridiculous that he could not repress a smile.

Manvers left Jarvis waiting at the station for the arrival of the train, and went back to the inn to report progress to Mrs. Bardell. That worthy woman was getting fidgety. Manvers had been out so long that she was afraid something had happened to him. She became quite nervous, and his arrival was a positive relief to her. In spite of her anxiety she had contrived to make a substantial repast upon the viands the landlord had placed before her—a partridge, and the best part of a grouse, had the honour of being devoured by her, and were washed down by a few glasses of very fine Roederer's champagne.

'Oh, Mr. Manvers!' she exclaimed, as he entered, throwing his hat into a corner and sitting down upon a sofa, 'I am so glad you have made your appearance; I didn't know what had become of you. I would have waited dinner for you, but you told me to begin, and I was that hungry that I could have eaten a crust of dry bread, though I've been feasting like any princess in a palace. Sit down, and see if you can't swallow a mouthful.'

'No, thank you,' he replied; 'I will have some wine, but I cannot eat.'

'As you please, sir; perhaps you will eat something later. The grouse is good, and the partridges I can recommend, though I should say that off side one, judging from its size, is a Frenchman. Perhaps you'll pick a bit later.'

'Very likely,' he answered, abstractedly pouring out some champagne in a tumbler, and drinking it at a draught.

'And may I make so bold as to ask how you got on with that desprit criminal we came to track and hunt down?'

'He is in the hands of the police, I am happy to say, and will be in the parish gaol in a couple of hours.'

'Bless me! that's doing of it quick; but I always did say you were so clever, Mr. George—I beg pardon for making use of your Christian name, but knowin' of you so long, and all that——'

‘Don’t apologise, Mrs. Bardell,’ he said, growing good-natured under the influence of the wine he was drinking copiously, ‘you may call me what you like.’

‘It was only the other day I was talking to my dear friend Mrs Chintop,’ continued Mrs. Bardell; ‘you don’t know Mrs. Chintop, sir, though like enough you have met her at my house. She is a very good soul, only I must be candid, and say she drinks. It’s her only weakness, and she owns to it. More’s the pity; but we mustn’t talk about one’s friends and neighbours behind their backs, though there isn’t a man, woman, or child in the street but will tell you her son’s wife squints awful, and her married daughter’s got a nose which turns up as if it was a going to heaven before its time.’

Manvers poured out some more wine, and watched it until all the foam died away, and the little sparkling globules, like restless spirits, forced themselves everlastingly up from the bottom of the glass, losing their beauty, and perishing when they reached the outer air. Then he took up little crumbs of bread, and dropped them into the wine, and saw the white foam once more gather around them; all this he seemed to enjoy with the satisfaction of a child. It was very clear that he did not hear much that Mrs. Bardell was saying, and that he paid but little attention to what he did hear.

He was the prey of a happy abstraction.

‘And this is what I said to Mrs. Chintop,’ resumed Mrs. Bardell, who liked to hear herself talk, and was pleased when she had the field all to herself; “my dear,” says I, “if there is one clever gentleman in or out of London, it’s Mr. Manvers. I could devote my whole life to him! I should not mind being his servant, for I do admire talent, whenever it is my fortunate lot to meet with it.” “Servant, indeed!” says she, a-perking up, “I should think, ma’am, that no one in your position would so demean herself. Why, what is this Mr. Manvers you’re always a talking about?” She being my friend, you see, sir, spoke warm. “He’s a good man,” I replies; “and what’s more, he’s a gentleman!” “That’s nothing,” she says; “gentlemen are as plentiful as blackberries; he’s a working his way up, I suppose; why, then, shouldn’t he make you his wife? Servant, indeed! if I was anything I’d be his wife; and a nice help you’d be, with your tact and experience, and a house full of furniture, as well as a bit of money put by in the bank, and a-growing at four-and-a-half per cent., withdrawable at a fortnight’s notice.”’

Manvers made no reply; he had not heard a word of the lengthy harangue which his companion addressed to him. She grew rather red in the face, and exclaimed—

‘And now you’ve heard all, sir, what do you think—was she right or wrong?’

He looked up, and said confusedly, ‘I really beg your pardon, but my thoughts were wandering; will you repeat your question?’

‘What I said was this, sir—was Mrs. Chintop, in the advice she gave me, right or wrong?’

He hazarded a guess, and replied, ‘Oh! quite right. Most decidedly quite right.’

Mrs. Bardell smiled, and rubbed her hands together delightedly under the cloth. She had thrown out her bait, and fancied that the big fish it was her ambition to catch had nibbled at it.

‘Well done, Sarah,’ she said to herself, ‘you ain’t such a fool as you looks, my dear. He’s on. It’s my private belief that it was the bit of money in the bank that done it. Men like a saving woman who’s got a few pounds to bless herself with. They prefer that sort to those who are always buying bonnets and crinolines, and such like, and never having a feather to fly with. Wasn’t he artful, too, pretending that he didn’t hear me, when he was a listenin’ all the time with every ear he’s got!’

She thought that she had gone far enough for that night, and that it would be best for her, like a prudent general, to rest on her laurels, so she adroitly changed the subject, saying—

‘This is a very nice-tasted wine, Mr. George, but I suppose it is dear?’

‘Yes, most likely.’

‘I went to my wine merchant’s the other day, at the corner of the street, and looked at all he’d got in the shop, pricing this and pricing that, but buying nothing—all being dear, except the French wines, and them I can’t a-bear.’

He was not at all sorry when Mrs. Bardell’s gossiping was brought to a close by the entrance of Serjeant Jarvis, who said, in a low tone—

‘He’s safe in gaol, sir. I thought you would be more easy if you knew, so I came to tell you, though hoping I don’t intrude.’

‘Not at all, my good fellow; sit down and take a glass of

wine. You have managed everything very skilfully, and the conduct of the affair does you great credit. Our bird is caged, Mrs. Bardell.'

'Indeed! We must take care and clip his wings, so that he doesn't get away again. I suppose, now that you have captured him, you will dispense with my service, and let me go back to town to-morrow morning?'

'Oh! dear no. I am sorry to undeceive you on that point; it will be necessary for you to remain here, and give evidence, until the accused is committed for trial. You can, of course, run backwards and forwards, but I should like you, as much as possible, to be on the spot.'

'Very well, sir; anything to oblige you, but it will be a serious loss to me,' answered Mrs. Bardell.

'I hope not. You must solace yourself with the reflection that you are furthering the ends of justice.'

'He likes to have me about him, or he wouldn't keep me here,' thought Mrs. Bardell.

In fact she was rather pleased with the idea of staying at a comfortable hotel at the seaside for a week, with frequent opportunities of ingratiating herself with Manvers, and showing him how amiable she was.

Jarvis informed them that their presence would be required at the court early on the following morning, and left them, receiving their assurance that they would be there at the time appointed.

He then walked back to Rockfort, and looked in at the distinguished prisoner it was his lot to guard.

The banker had occupied the time he had been in prison by endeavouring to devise some way of escaping from the dilemma in which he found himself. The warrant upon which he had been arrested had been shown to him, and he knew that he was incarcerated for a serious offence.

He slept little in the prison, and when morning dawned was walking up and down his narrow cell, impatiently awaiting the arrival of his examination.

Without much difficulty the absconding banker was committed for trial, an event which resulted in a sentence of ten years' penal servitude.

Mrs. Bardell received a small pecuniary reward for her services; but in spite of her fascinations she did not marry George Manvers, the city detective, which disappointment

exposed her to the cruel ridicule of Mrs. Chintop for ever afterwards.

But these pleasant evenings were few and far between; they were like oases in the desert. Trouble was looming in the distance, and the new Lord Cariston's happiness was destined to be short-lived.

CHAPTER XI.

DADDY CHIVERTON IN DANGER.

HAMLEY MORRIS arrived in London.

His business, it may be plainly stated, was to effect the capture of Daddy Chiverton; threaten him with a prosecution for the attempt to murder; and wring the full particulars of this plot from him.

That Daddy Chiverton was in the secret of the plot which had raised Darby to the peerage there could be no doubt.

It will, perhaps, have been conjectured that Hamley Morris was a detective, employed by Lady Cariston to solve the mystery of Darby's sudden appearance as the heir to the Hartshill estates.

The conjecture will have been well-founded, for such was the case; and the metropolitan police force boasted no more intelligent officer than Morris.

Many apparently inexplicable affairs had been solved through his agency; and he did not despair of throwing light upon the singular one which now engaged his attention.

His first care was to arrest Daddy Chiverton.

To find a man in London may seem a difficult undertaking; but it was less difficult to Hamley Morris than it would have been to one less versed in a peculiar sort of knowledge of human nature.

He considered where such a man as Daddy Chiverton would be most likely to go to on his arrival in London.

That he had gone to the capital the detective discovered by making inquiries at the railway stations.

For some days Hamley Morris frequented places of amusement at the east end. He was acquainted with the person and features of the man he was in search of, and fancied that he would be more inclined to plunge into dissipation at the east than at the west end of the town.

One night, on visiting a theatre in the centre of a densely-populated neighbourhood, he saw Daddy Chiverton in the pit with two friends, whom he recognised as notorious evil-

doers ; they were chatting together, and seemed pleased with the entertainment, which an enterprising manager had provided for them. While Hamley Morris was deliberating as to whether he should arrest Chiverton in the theatre, the three men rose and passed out.

He followed them.

They lingered at the entrance for a moment, and he gathered from their conversation that something had alarmed them, and that they deemed it prudent to go.

To attack the three men would be to encounter desperate odds ; and Hamley Morris proposed following them to their dwelling, because when they were safely housed, he could take what measures he pleased to effect the capture of the old man.

It was Morris's opinion that Daddy Chiverton did not know into what dangerous company he had fallen ; and that the object of the thieves was to rid him of his money, as soon as they had sufficiently insinuated themselves into his confidence.

They threaded Whitechapel ; passed through Wapping ; and after paying more than one casual visit to a public-house, came to a small, low-looking tavern.

This was peculiarly situated.

At the end of the street flowed the river, and the house was built so as to place its back upon a little creek which ran out of the river.

There were houses on each side of the creek, the back windows of all of them opening into the narrow channel, which was not more than thirty feet across.

Some distance higher up, the waste of a large factory was discharged into the creek, which probably accounted for its preservation.

At low tide there was not much water in the creek, but when the tide was up, the river came almost to a level with the windows of the tap-room.

It was to this house that Daddy Chiverton and his friends went.

Hamley Morris entered the bar and called for some spirits and water, which was supplied to him.

The men went upstairs, and he heard their voices in a room above the bar into which he did not dare to pursue them at present, for fear of exciting their suspicions and encountering a formidable resistance.

A few ruffians, who were choice specimens of their class, were standing round the bar drinking, swearing at everything in general, and the police in particular.

It would have gone hard with Hamley Morris if they had entertained any suspicion of his real vocation.

He was perfectly well aware of this.

After drinking his grog, he left the house with the intention of looking for assistance.

With Daddy Chiverton's two friends he could do nothing, although he knew them to be convicted thieves; and this is the great difficulty the police have to contend with. They must not lay their hands on bad characters, although they know them to be such, unless they can catch them in the commission of some illegal act.

It was a fine moonlight night. The streets were dry, and by the aid of the moonlight, together with that cast by his lantern, Morris saw a constable who had just come on duty; the time being about a quarter to eleven.

Beckoning to the constable, Hamley Morris waited for him to approach.

'You are on duty for the night?'

'Yes,' was the reply.

'I am in the detective department, Scotland Yard, and I am also a serjeant of the A reserve,' continued Morris. 'My name is Nugent,'—this was his professional appellation—'it may be known to you. However that may be, I stand in need of your assistance.'

'You shall have it, Mr. Nugent,' answered the policeman, who became civil and interested at once.

'If this affair be well managed I shall not forget you,' Hamley Morris went on; 'I will see what can be done for you in the way of promotion. But we have difficult work before us. Do you know a small tavern on the left hand side?'

'The "Creek House"?''

'That is it. What sort of character does it bear?'

'The worst in the neighbourhood. It gives us more trouble than a dozen others, and is always full of bad characters. Only the other day one of our men was knocked about there shamefully.'

'Are you armed?'

'I have my truncheon. That is all they allow us here.'

‘And I have a revolver. We shall be a match for them, I think. Now attend to me. There is an old countryman upstairs, in the company of two well-known thieves. I have known them at the west-end. The old man I must have, for a capital offence; the others may go where they like. What I am afraid of is, an attempt at rescue by those below.’

‘Will you watch while I go to the station for assistance, Mr. Nugent?’ said the constable.

‘I think I won’t risk that; our birds might give us the slip,’ answered Hamley Morris. ‘No, we will make the attempt now, and I shall rely upon your hearty co-operation. You will wait outside until you hear me fire my revolver; which I shall do as a signal that I require your assistance.’

The constable nodded.

‘My name’s Sampson, sir,’ he said, ‘if you should think of me when it’s all over.’

‘A good name, too,’ said Hamley Morris, surveying with admiration the stalwart fellow before him, who was over six feet in height, and stout and strong in proportion.

CHAPTER XII.

A DESPERATE AFFAIR.

MORRIS entered the "Creek House," and this time walked boldly upstairs. The landlord looked enquiringly after him, but did not interfere, thinking he had business with those in the private room.

This room was only used by privileged customers. It had two windows, which looked out on the creek. As the night was warm, and the gas made the atmosphere hot, they were both open, and the rushing noise made by the ebbing tide as it flowed past some piles in its way was distinctly audible.

The three men he had seen in the theatre were sitting round a table, on which was a bottle of champagne, and by its side two empty ones.

A few sporting pictures garnished the walls. The floor was sanded, and the furniture was made up of tables and chairs.

Morris nodded familiarly to the men, and taking a seat, said—

'You did not expect to see me, I suppose. Don't be alarmed, Ned Thompson, or you, Beaver. I am not after you. I have only come to renew my acquaintance with our excellent friend, Mr. Chiverton.'

This address created the utmost consternation.

The two thieves were somewhat reassured when they heard that the celebrated detective had not come to arrest them. They at once concluded that Chiverton, who spent his money freely, and who seemed to have plenty of it, had committed a robbery.

At the same time they thought they were under some species of obligation to defend him.

Daddy Chiverton turned pale ; but he did not know Hamley Morris, and he said so.

'Perhaps not. However, I have to thank you for firing a little too high the other night when I came back from Stanton, or I should not be here now,' said Hamley Morris.

'It is you, is it?' exclaimed Chiverton, with a curse. 'That's just right, I can do now what I intended to do then.'

Morris drew his revolver from his pocket, and cocking it, said—

'I shall not hesitate to use this if any foul play be attempted; and possibly you and I, Mr. Chiverton, may come to an arrangement which will do away with the necessity of my taking you up on a charge of attempted murder.'

'What arrangement?' demanded Daddy Chiverton, keeping his eye fixed upon the revolver.

'I must apologise for entering into private matters before third parties,' answered Morris. 'This, however, is my proposition. If you will make a detailed confession of the plot which has made your son Lord Cariston, I will forget the two shots you fired at me on the Stanton road. The evidence against you is complete. The wadding which encircled the balls was torn from an old almanack found on your table, and——'

'You may save yourself any farther trouble, master,' interrupted Daddy Chiverton. 'If you tore me limb from limb I'd confess nothing. You won't get any information out of me, so I tell you. My son is Lord Cariston, so let him be.'

Hamley Morris was about to reply, when he found himself seized from behind by the man whom he had addressed as Beaver, and who, during the progress of this conversation, had quitted his seat and crept in the rear of the detective.

The grasp in which he was held was of such a vice-like nature that Hamley Morris, though retaining his hold of the pistol, was unable to move.

'Quick, Ned,' cried Beaver, 'get the rope and let him cross over.'

Thompson quickly produced a long and thick rope from a cupboard in the corner of the room.

Going to a window he uttered a peculiar cry, and threw the rope across the creek.

It was most dexterously caught by a man in a house on the other side, and fixed by a loop, to a large iron hook cemented in the wall.

'Get on the rope,' he said to Chiverton, 'and cross by it hand over hand. Look sharp. You've no time to waste.'

Daddy Chiverton went to the window, and hesitated.

The quickly flowing water, looking black and turbid below him, did not serve to reassure a man who could not swim.

Making a strong effort, Hamley Morris, at this juncture, pulling the trigger, fired his pistol.

He could not take aim.

That did not matter. The sound could be heard by Sampson outside, and he would come to his assistance.

The sound of the pistol's explosion alarmed Chiverton, and he, making a desperate effort, got hold of the rope, and with slow and laborious movements, exerted himself to gain the opposite side.

Some men in the house which he was nearing encouraged him with their cries, and cheered him on.

Beaver still held Morris in his powerful grasp, and Ned Thompson shouted advice to Daddy Chiverton, who, with the utmost difficulty, dragged the weight of his body along.

The old man was not so active as he had been once, and, in truth, the task he had set him was not very easy of accomplishment.

A change in the aspect of affairs took place when police-constable Sampson entered the apartment with his truncheon drawn.

He comprehended the situation at a glance.

One tremendous blow felled Thompson like an ox, and another laid Beaver senseless at the feet of the detective. 'Mind the door, while I cut the rope,' exclaimed Hamley Morris, as soon as he had regained his liberty.

This injunction was rendered necessary by a threatened influx from below.

An alarm had been created by the report of the pistol, and the sudden appearance of a constable in uniform on the scene.

Sampson effectually performed the part of sentry, and kept back the furious rabble, who, with the landlord at their head, clamoured loudly for admittance.

Drawing a knife from his pocket, Hamley Morris looked out of the window, and by the aid of the moonlight, distinctly saw what was going on.

Daddy Chiverton, after heroic efforts, had got three parts of the way across.

He was almost exhausted.

The excitement of those on the side he was approaching was intense.

They held out their hands to help him as soon as he got near enough, and redoubled their hoarse cries, which they intended should stimulate him to increased exertions.

‘Come back!’ shouted Morris.

‘Never!’ answered Daddy Chiverton, between his teeth.

Hamley Morris was now only anxious that Chiverton should not escape him.

He felt his professional reputation to be at stake.

Better that he should fall into the creek and be drowned than that he should escape from the trammels of justice. Far better that his secret should perish with him, than that he should gain shelter on the other side and laugh at his pursuers.

‘You refuse to come back?’ continued Morris.

In fact, the old man could not have done so had he chosen.

It was as much as he could accomplish to reach the friendly hands which were stretched out to help him, if he could do so much.

He was within a yard of them now.

Hamley Morris raised his knife, and brought it down with sabre-like effect upon the rope, which, thick as it was, became instantly severed before the keen blade.

With a jerk, Daddy Chiverton was thrown against the wall of the opposite house.

If he could have held on he would have been saved.

Those above would have hauled him up.

The shock, however, caused him to lose his hold, and he was precipitated into the dark stream below.

In falling he uttered a despairing cry, which was echoed by those who had evinced such a friendly interest in his welfare.

The water closed over his head, and he was lost to sight.

CHAPTER XIII.

STARTLING DISCLOSURES.

By the instructions of the now Lord Cariston, Mr. Snarley gave Mr. Ingledew legal notice to quit Heart's Content. By Lady Cariston's—that is to say, the Dowager Lady Cariston's—advice he refused to take any notice of it.

'Let us defy them,' she said boldly. 'You know, my dear Mr. Ingledew, that possession is nine points of the law. Very well. We have possession; we will keep it. I may add that I am hopeful of events occurring within a few weeks which will materially alter the complexion of affairs.'

'I am astonished,' observed Marian, 'that Miss Seafield should not have had more consideration for us. Now she is Lady Cariston she could surely avert this threatened evil, had she but the will to do so.'

'I will venture to predict that her triumph will be short-lived,' answered Lady Cariston.

Captain Scudamore was informed that he might take possession of Heart's Content on a certain day; and he drove over at the stated time to see if the place were empty and in a fit condition for habitation.

His surprise was great when he discovered that it showed every sign of being occupied.

Ringing the bell, the domestic informed him, in reply to his question, that Mr. Ingledew was, at present, the tenant of the house, and that he could see him if he wished.

Accordingly Captain Scudamore was ushered into the drawing-room, as he did wish to see Mr. Ingledew.

The antiquary entered with his coat sleeves tucked up to the elbow, and his hands covered with clay. He had been extracting some fossils from their earthy bed, and apologised for being in such a condition.

'Do not make any apology, I beg,' said the captain. 'It is I who ought to make excuses to you, I fear.'

'What is your business with me?' asked Mr. Ingledew.

‘Have you received a notice to quit these premises, may I ask?’

‘That is a question which I do not feel myself at liberty to reply to,’ answered Mr. Ingledew, guardedly. ‘If you are a lawyer employed by Lord Cariston, all I can tell you is that I mean to remain here.’

‘Indeed. I am sorry to hear that,’ rejoined Captain Scudamore, ‘because I had hoped to occupy the house for a shooting-box. My card would have told you, if you had looked at it, that I am a captain in the army, and attached to a regiment at present quartered at Stanton.’

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Mr. Ingledew. ‘I thought you were some emissary of Lord Cariston’s, sent to entrap me into some admission which a lawyer would know too well how to turn to his own purpose.’

‘Perhaps there is some mistake on the part of my friend, Lord Cariston,’ returned the captain. ‘His legal adviser told me that I could come over here to-day and ask for the keys, preparatory to taking up my abode here. I will drive to the castle and represent the state of matters to his lordship.’

‘You can do that if you please,’ answered Mr. Ingledew. ‘I regret that you should have been disappointed, Captain Scudamore, but I am advised to remain where I am.’

‘No doubt you have excellent motives for so doing?’

‘That remains to be seen.’

Captain Scudamore very politely took leave of Mr. Ingledew, and drove over to the castle, where he found Darby, who, having had a little tiff with his imperious wife, and being unmistakably beaten in the encounter, was not in the best of tempers.

The captain’s story was soon told.

‘They won’t go, won’t they?’ vociferated Darby. ‘Then I’ll know the reason why. Have you got your trap outside?’

‘I have.’

Drive me over, and I’ll show you whether I cannot go into my own place or not.’

‘If you will excuse me, I would rather not be mixed up in the affair,’ replied Captain Scudamore. ‘When you have got rid of your obnoxious tenants I shall be very glad to rent your house; but you must not be offended with me if I refuse to take any part in the process of eviction.’

‘As you like. I’m not so squeamish,’ answered Darby.

‘Why, I should like to know, should a man be kept out of his own?’

‘There is no reason that I can see, if he has a good title.’

‘Mine is indisputable.’

‘I wish you luck. You may take the trap and welcome. I will wait here and smoke a cigar till you come back, if you have no objection.’

‘Oh, no, none at all,’ answered Darby.

The captain strolled into a conservatory, thinking he had caught sight of the folds of Lady Cariston’s dress amongst the orange trees, and Darby strode through the hall, jumped into the trap, and drove off to Heart’s Content to bully its inmates.

As soon as Captain Scudamore had gone, Mr. Ingledew summoned Lady Cariston and Marian to inform them of what had taken place.

They commended his behaviour; and were engaged in conversation when Darby drove up.

As they were in the drawing-room, the windows of which looked out upon the lawn, through which the carriage drive ran, they saw at a glance who their visitor was this time.

Darby did not request an audience with Mr. Ingledew. He threw the reins to the groom who had accompanied him, impudently strode into the hall, and pushing open the drawing-room door, went in and confronted the trio.

An angry flush mantled Mr. Ingledew’s face at this gratuitous insolence.

‘What is the meaning of this, sir?’ he demanded, as calmly as his excitement would let him.

‘What is the meaning of your refusing to let my tenant have possession of Heart’s Content?’ returned Darby. ‘The place is mine, I believe.’

‘I am not disputing your title.’

‘You keep my mother here to conspire against me,’ continued Darby. ‘She knows she is my mother though she won’t own it.’

‘My maternal instinct rebels at the bare idea,’ retorted Lady Cariston.

‘I don’t care. I can get on without you, and you may go and let your instinct rebel somewhere else. You shan’t stay here—not one of you shall. Do you hear that?’

‘You speak loud enough, my good fellow,’ replied Mr. Ingledew, ‘but I tell you that you must go to work legally. This blustering will have no effect.’

‘I’ll burn the place down over your heads!’ cried Darby, beside himself with rage.

‘You seem to be fond of doing that sort of thing. Take care you don’t get indicted for arson,’ said Lady Cariston.

Darby raised his hand and clenched his fist.

Her ladyship thought that he meant to strike her.

‘Oh, the coward!’ she cried. ‘Would that my son—my Ashley were here to protect me.’

As she spoke, the centre window of the drawing-room, which extended to the floor in the Venetian style, was dashed violently open.

A man sprang into the room.

A voice exclaimed :

‘He is here, mother!’

The next instant Darby felt himself forcibly seized by the collar of his coat. He was dragged out on to the lawn.

His captor grasped the horsewhip while passing the carriage ; broke it in half ; and administered such a castigation to Darby as he had never received before, and which made him black and blue for many a day afterwards.

‘Cowardly hound!’ exclaimed the man who had thus treated him. ‘Begone instantly.’

Darby stood trembling before him, his eyes starting from their sockets, and exhibiting signs of extreme agitation and terror.

‘Ashley Leigh,’ he stammered.

‘Off with you,’ was the reply.

He did not stir, and his aggressor drove him with blows and kicks to the fence separating the lawn from the park, into which he fell headlong.

It was indeed Ashley Leigh.

No ghost, no apparition.

Ashley Leigh in the flesh, safe, sound and well as he had ever been.

Returning to the drawing-room, Mr. Inglelew said :

‘Explain this mystery. Has Mr. Leigh sprang from the grave?’

‘It may have appeared so to you,’ replied Lady Cariston ; ‘but your daughter Marian and I have known him to be alive for some time past. He has remained concealed, as we thought it best that he should do so, and——’

‘He would not be here now had he been able to keep his

temper, when that contemptible cur began to lord it over you all,' added Ashley Leigh, laughing.

'Thank heaven the concealment is now all over,' sighed Marian.

'But the mystery? That to me is as profound as ever,' observed Mr. Ingledew.

'I will explain, my dear sir, presently,' answered Ashley Leigh. 'Just now I am tired with my exertions; and the pleasure of talking openly and unreservedly to my dear Marian and my mother is too great to be resisted.'

It was some time before Mr. Ingledew was able to extract the following facts from him.

He did not go to London, as was supposed, on the night of his disappearance, but took refuge with Thorne, the gate-keeper, at the lodge.

Lady Cariston was cognisant of this; it being originally intended that he should remain concealed for a few days, to see what happened and what was to be done.

It was impossible for him to stay at Hartshill Castle, and assist at the triumph of Darby Chiverton.

When the news came that his body was found, frightfully mutilated, on a railway near London, he resolved to let every one, but his mother and Marian, believe that he was really dead.

That the deceased should have been in the possession of articles belonging to him was very strange.

It was accounted for in this way.

The rooms he occupied in Duke Street, St. James's, had a few days previously been broken open, and many things of value abstracted therefrom.

The man found on the metals of the railway must have been one of the thieves.

Ashley Leigh did not scruple to deceive his father; because he felt that he was treating him cruelly by discharging him in favour of the adventurer, Darby, whose claim should have been thoroughly sifted and examined before a competent tribunal ere it had been admitted.

Near Thorne's cottage was the entrance to an underground passage connected with the old abbey, which had been used by the monks for some purpose of their own.

In the vaults below the ruins of the Abbey, Thorne made Mr. Leigh a comfortable chamber, which he supplied with

books, wine, furniture, lamps, and everything that he could wish; this being done with the assistance and connivance of Lady Cariston.

At night he wandered forth.

This accounted for the apparently supernatural appearance which had so startled Mona and Daddy Chiverton.

It also enabled him to be present at the fire, where, his features draped in an extemporized mask, he seized a ladder, and at a most critical moment rescued Marian from an awful death.

His confinement was very dreary, but he determined to endure it until the villains who were plotting against him were unmasked, and he could increase their discomfiture by his sudden and unlooked for appearance.

His being out of the way, it was thought by Hamley Morris, under whose directions Lady Cariston had acted all through, would render the conspirators more unguarded in their movements.

So Ashley Leigh remained concealed, day after day, week after week.

His hasty conduct, on the present occasion, rather precipitated matters.

He could no longer pretend to be dead.

There was great rejoicing and festivity at Heart's Content that night.

It somewhat atoned for their wretchedly dull Christmas; which had been made worse by Lord Cariston's untimely death.

Ashley Leigh's re-appearance flew from mouth to mouth.

The whole county rang with it.

In time it reached the ears of Mr. Jonas Bloxam.

He did not like it.

If Darby were proved an impostor, and Mr. Bloxam did not know what available evidence his enemies had at their disposal, he would be a great loser.

The jewels he held as security were practically worthless for he could not dispose of them; they would be recognized; and a recognition of them would place him in the awkward position of a receiver of stolen goods.

Jonas Bloxam held the written proofs of Darby's villany.

He could, if he liked, make terms with Ashley Leigh; and establish him in the position from which he had been turned out.

What should he do ?

As Jonas Bloxam never acted hastily, he slept over the matter.

Darby was furious at the treatment he had met with ; as he was no match in physical strength for Ashley Leigh, he called upon his solicitor, Mr. Snarley, and put the law in force.

In the afternoon, Mr. Snarley called at Heart's Content, and served Mr. Ingledew with a legal notice of ejection, he having already received one to quit ; and he handed Ashley Leigh a summons for assaulting Lord Cariston.

Then, having done his dirty work, he wended his way to the castle, where he was to dine.

Captain Scudamore was, of course, one of the guests.

His attentions to Mona were more marked than ever.

Darby frowned, when he saw the looks that were exchanged between them, and the demon of jealousy gnawed at his heart.

He drank deeply that night, and when his bruised and battered countenance, disfigured by patches of plaster, was inflamed with wine, he had a diabolical appearance, from which any woman might have been forgiven from shrinking.

After dinner a scrap of paper was put into his hand by a servant.

Unfolding it, he read—

'If some favourable terms are not immediately made with me, I shall consider whether it will not be worth my while to bargain with Mr. Ashley Leigh for the incriminatory document which I hold.'

There was no signature, but Darby knew from whence it came.

It was a threat from Jonas Bloxam.

This note served the purpose of the death's head at the banquet.

He drank glass after glass of wine without being able to drown his fears of coming evil ; 'uneasy lies the head that wears a crown,' and no peace had the gaudy coronet brought to the false Lord Cariston.

CHAPTER XIV.

A RIOT AT THE CASTLE.

THE way in which Mona flirted with Captain Scudamore was so flagrant and palpable that no one could fail to notice it.

Major Dandy M'Dinmont, an astute Scotsman, who had accepted the hospitality of the new Lord Cariston, in conjunction with many of his brother officers, remarked it. And having a propensity for making mischief, the major called Darby's attention to his wife's indiscretion, and so fanned the flame, which indeed did not stand in need of being increased.

'Nonsense!' said Darby, in reply to a remark of the major's, which he did not choose to interpret properly. 'I don't think her ladyship means anything. You are mistaken, Major. It's a way she has.'

'Aweel,' answered Major Dandy M'Dinmont. 'I'm unco glad you dinna' fash yersel'. If she were my wife I'd interfere in double quick time. "Every lassie has her laddie," as the song says.'

'I like to see her lively,' said Darby, gnashing his teeth.

'I'm na speering at ye,' rejoined the major. 'But your lairdship should look after a young callant like Scudamore. I dinna' like it. Ill will come of it. I ken that well enuch. I dinna' like it. Na, sir.'

When Mona rose to go to the drawing-room, Captain Scudamore stood by the dining-room door, holding it open, to allow her and his friends to pass.

Darby, brushing rudely past him, overtook Mona in the hall.

'I want to speak to you, my lady,' he said, bluntly.

Mona would have treated him with contempt, and passed on; but there was that in his eye which warned her not to trifle with him too much, just at that moment.

'It seems,' he continued, as she halted in the hall, after saying a word to the nearest lady, requesting her and her companions to excuse her for a short time, and proceed to the drawing-room. 'It seems that you like that Captain Scudamore better than you do me.'

‘What if I do?’ she had the hardihood to answer.

‘It’s a pity you did not make the discovery before you married me!’ he replied bitterly.

‘Is there anything surprising in it?’

‘Do you want to madden me? Do you want to make me kill the man?’ said Darby, loudly, and trembling with excitement.

‘You know the value of your own life,’ said Mona, calmly ‘If you choose to risk your life that is your business, not mine.’

Her very calmness exasperated him all the more.

She was imprudently throwing fuel upon the fire.

‘Everybody remarked your conduct at dinner,’ exclaimed Darby, controlling himself by a violent effort.

‘The fact is I have been accustomed to the society of gentlemen all my life, and when I come in contact with them, I cannot help being repelled by you. If you were to shut me up, without any friend to visit me, I might learn to appreciate you, though I do not seriously say that such would be the case.’

‘If Captain Scudamore were a gentleman, he would not insult me in my own house, by making love to my wife, retorted Darby. ‘But I’ll take very good care that he shall soon go out of it.’

‘Your house!’ echoed Mona, her eyes flashing with withering contempt; for this threat of ejecting the captain exasperated her in her turn.

‘Who’s else is it?’

‘Your house!’ she repeated. ‘One word of mine would have the effect of restoring it to its rightful owner. Don’t think to brow-beat me. I have the whip-hand there, and on occasion, would show you that I know how to lash your cowardly shoulders.’

‘Don’t talk so loud!’ exclaimed Darby, in a voice which trembled with suppressed fury. ‘What good would it do you to spoil everything? You would fall in the common ruin.’

‘Perhaps I should feather my nest sufficiently before the storm broke. At all events, don’t you threaten me; because that is a species of amusement at which two can play, as I will show you—as, indeed, I have shown you already.’

‘What did you marry me for?’ asked Darby.

‘For your money, your title—for those worldly advantages

which I helped you to attain; certainly not for yourself,' replied Mona.

'You dare to tell me that?'

'Oh dear, yes; and a great deal more,' she said, laughingly.

Darby's passion now burst all bounds, and gained a strength which he was unable to resist.

Seizing her by the arm, he shook her violently, and threw her from him afterwards with all his force.

'Help me! help me! oh, help!' Mona had time to say before she fell, half-stunned, against the staircase.

Captain Scudamore was not a spectator of this disgraceful scene; but he heard the cry for help, and he rushed into the hall in time to see Mona sink upon the oil-cloth.

'Cowardly ruffian!' he ejaculated, looking at Darby.

'Don't come too near me. My blood's up; and I won't answer for the consequences!' shouted Darby.

'Are you hurt?' said the captain, bending over Mona.

'Oh, yes!' she murmured. 'My arm pains me, and my head. Where is he?'

'Come away, sir. This is no business of yours. Go out of my house this instant, I order you!' exclaimed Darby, in an excited tone. 'Go this moment.'

The captain hesitated.

'My private quarrels have nothing to do with my guests,' continued Darby. 'That woman is a falsehearted wife, and you are the cause of it all. Go, sir, you cannot stay after my dismissal if you wish to be considered an officer and a gentleman.'

'I feel bound to protect this lady from your unmanly violence,' answered the captain.

'Will you go?' cried Darby, foaming at the mouth.

'If I have your assurance that this scene shall not be repeated.'

'I shall give you no assurance of the kind, and if you don't go at once, I shall make you,' answered Darby.

'Make me! I don't understand being threatened,' said the captain.

'Then you'll understand that,' replied Darby, dashing his fist in his face.

Captain Scudamore fell. His brother officers rushed out of the dining-room at the noise, and the commotion amongst the guests was great. The ladies were roused in the drawing-

room, and they came out too, making the confusion worse confounded.

‘I say this man shall go out of my house,’ shouted Darby. ‘He’s insulted me. He’s been going on with my wife in a way I can’t allow, and he shall either go quietly, or be kicked out.’

‘What a scene!’ said one of the ladies, ‘and what bad taste to parade such a matter.’

‘Can you expect anything else from such a man?’ said another.

‘He has no breeding,’ rejoined the first speaker.

Captain Scudamore was about to attack Darby when he recovered from the effects of the blow which had been given him.

His brother officers, however, would not allow him to do so. They told him that he must horsewhip Darby publicly, but that his proper course now was to leave the house.

Blinded with passion, it was with the utmost difficulty that he could be restrained.

The officers considered that the regiment had been insulted by such behaviour, and decided that they would all take their leave.

This they did as soon as their equipages could be got round to the door.

Mr. and Mrs. Snarley were the only ones who remained.

Darby stood with his arms folded, scowling at everybody, and Mrs. Snarley led Mona upstairs to her bedroom.

Lieutenant Wood said to Darby as he was going away—

‘We all regret that this affair should have happened; but since you have taken the law into your own hands in so decided a manner, we feel obliged, as Captain Scudamore’s friends, to leave your house, though we are obliged to you for your hospitality.’

‘Yes, you army fellows can eat and drink when you haven’t got to pay for it,’ replied Darby, rudely.

‘That’s the sort of speech I might have expected from a man of your stamp,’ answered Lieutenant Wood. ‘But I have only myself to blame for it. Good night, Lord Cariston or Mr. Chiverton, whichever you are.’

Darby felt inclined to knock him down, but he had too many friends with him. They would undoubtedly take his part, and if a personal conflict ensued he would get the worst of it.

‘You are a set of mean fellows,’ he said. ‘I am glad to get rid of you.’

The next moment he was alone with Mr. Snarley.

The lawyer suggested an adjournment to the dining-room, as he had not yet finished his wine.

‘I should get out of this if I were you, my lord,’ he said.

‘What for?’ asked Darby.

‘What has occurred to-night will get about. Travel, it will improve your mind.’

‘Confound your impudence, sir,’ answered Darby, who was in a quarrelsome temper. ‘Improve your own low mind, and leave mine alone. What have you to do with it?’

‘Perhaps I had better go home too,’ answered Snarley, alarmed.

‘The sooner the better,’ replied Darby.

Mr. Snarley got up from the table, muttering something about ‘ill-conditioned hounds,’ and ‘setting beggars on horseback, then went to find his wife.

Soon afterwards they were driving along the road to Stanton in the lawyer’s old-fashioned gig.

CHAPTER XV.

MONA'S FLIGHT.

WHEN Darby was alone he determined to go and speak to Mona.

There was no one to interfere between them now.

Her bed-room door was locked, and he knocked, without gaining admittance or even receiving an answer.

'Open the door, madam,' he cried.

Still receiving no answer, he kicked the door violently and succeeded in breaking it open.

Mona, wrapped in a pink flannel dressing-gown, was busily engaged in packing up some boxes. On a table by her side lay a small pistol.

Pointing to it, she said—

'Do you see this? It is loaded with ball, and I have placed it there to protect myself against your violence. Instantly leave this room, or——'

'What?' he demanded, shrinking back.

'Take the consequences.'

'Would you shoot me?' he asked, in alarm.

'Like a dog, and with as little compassion,' was the cool and deliberate answer.

Darby became afraid that in her frenzy she might do him an injury, and he retreated, wondering why she was packing up her things, and what her intentions were.

'Where are you going?' he queried, when he had reached the door.

'That is my business,' she rejoined. 'It was never my intention to stay long under your roof, and since the events of this evening, it is impossible for me to remain.'

'It will be a good riddance,' said Darby.

'I am glad you think so,' she replied.

'I don't know why I married you,' he continued.

'Because you could not help yourself,' said Mona; adding, 'We perfectly understand one another, my Lord Cariston. We

are necessary to each other, but we need not continue together. You shall go your way, I will go mine. Supply me with the money I ask for, that is all I want.'

'But suppose I love you,' exclaimed Darby, who really did feel some affection for the splendid creature before him.

It is always the way. When we are about to be deprived of anything, we find that we really care for it and wish to keep it.

So it was with Darby.

Mona burst out into a loud laugh.

'I am sorry for you in that case,' she said.

'Can't we make it up?' he asked.

'Never,' was the emphatic answer.

'But Mona—dear Mona——'

'I hate you, Darby Chiverton. More than that, worse than that, I despise you; and when a man has merited and incurred a woman's contempt, the death of love and esteem is certain; if such things ever existed, which they never did with me for you,' replied Mona, in a clear voice, which did not shake or change in the slightest degree.

For a minute Darby was silent.

'Will you leave me alone,' she continued; 'or must I take decided measures to rid myself of your presence?'

'I will go,' he answered. And he went away slowly, with tears in his eyes.

That night he drank hard, by himself; and in the morning the servants found him snoring heavily on the dining-room floor.

It was ten o'clock when Darby awoke, hot and feverish, with his head 'splitting,' as he expressed it to himself. Getting up from the floor, he rang for soda and brandy; drinking this, he put on his hat, and unwashed—unshaved as he was, he sallied forth into the cool morning air, taking the way to the river.

He did not notice that he was followed:

It was so, however.

A man who had walked up the avenue, with the intention of calling at the castle, had seen him emerge from the house, and take the direction of the lowlands, through which ran the meandering stream, called the river.

In summer it was very little more than a trout stream.

But in the spring or the late winter months, when the rain

came down from the high lands, or the snow melted on the hills, its stream assumed formidable proportions.

This was the case at the time we speak of.

A heavy fall of snow had been succeeded by a rapid thaw.

The ditches were streaming over with water, and all the little tributaries of the river carried their quota to its bed, and it overflowed its banks in some places, flooding the valley and inundating what were known as the 'water-meadows.'

Darby made his way towards a small wooden bridge, which spanned the stream, and the approach to which was as yet unblocked by the water.

Over the wooden railings he leant, looking at the turbid waters, rushing along at a few yards below him.

Suddenly his meditations were broken by a—

'Good morning, my lord.'

He turned round.

On the bridge, a few paces from him, was a man. This man occupied his thoughts, and had done so ever since he awoke in the morning, yet he did not want to see him.

Jonas Bloxam never really received a welcome from any of his numerous acquaintances.

Friends he had none.

'Oh, it is you! What do you want?' inquired Darby trying to speak steadily.

He looked wretchedly ill, and he did not appear one atom worse than he felt. The wine he had drunk overnight had acted injuriously upon his health, and he was weak, giddy, and bilious.

'I must have ten thousand pounds at once,' said Jonas Bloxam; 'Ashley Leigh has come back. You may be turned out at any moment, and I don't like the look of affairs at all.'

'You have the jewels,' answered Darby, thinking of his first serious step in crime, the conflagration which followed his theft, which resulted in the destruction of one wing of the castle, and indirectly in the death of the well-meaning but somewhat weak minded Lord Cariston.

'They are only of use as security, and I will give them back to you, as I cannot dispose of them. What I want is hard cash,' answered the usurer. 'You bring me the money in gold and notes, and——'

'You will give me the confession you extracted from me said Darby, eagerly.

‘That I have told you, I shall keep always.’

‘As a means of extortion.’

‘We will not quarrel about terms,’ answered Jonas Bloxam, shrugging his shoulders.

‘According to that,’ Darby said, ‘you will be able to turn me out of house and home. If I give you this money now, what guarantee have I that you will not, in a month or two’s time come upon me for more?’

‘None whatever,’ replied the usurer.

‘Upon my word you are candid, Mr. Bloxam,’ answered Darby.

‘I find it the best way,’ replied the old man, quietly.

‘If I am to be in your power, I had better have remained as I was, poor and friendless, but with no weight on my mind.’

‘It is useless to talk about that—am I to have the money?’

‘What if I refuse?’ asked Darby.

‘I have been considering what it would be best for me to do in the event of a refusal,’ answered Jonas Bloxam. ‘Of course I must protect myself. You have had my money——’

‘I am willing to pay it you back again,’ anxiously interposed Darby.

‘I want something more.’

‘Yes, you are a vampire!’ cried Darby, excitedly. ‘You want to drain me of every shilling. But you shan’t do it. You want to get this fine estate into your miserable hands. You want to have the Cariston broad acres in your clutches, and you intend to make me the instrument through which you will accomplish your ambitious ends.’

‘I could not have given a better exposition of my plans myself,’ said Jonas Bloxam, with a smile.

‘You shan’t do it; I repeat, you shan’t do it,’ answered Darby.

‘I will tell you what I shall do then,’ replied the old man.

‘Well?’

‘If you do not comply with my terms, and place yourself unreservedly in my hands, I will go to the enemy and place your confession in the hands of Ashley Leigh, who will know what to do with it, I warrant.’

‘Contemptible scoundrel!’ ejaculated Darby.

‘It is useless to waste time in exchanging personalities. I

could call you quite as hard names as you can apply to me,' replied Jonas Bloxam.

A sudden inclination to throw the old man into the river seized Darby.

He looked around him.

No one was in sight.

The only witness of the crime would be the all-seeing eye of heaven.

In his half-mad state Darby was capable of committing any atrocity.

Besides, he had embarked in a career of crime, and he did not believe in doing things by halves.

'Well, my lord, your answer?' said the usurer. 'Heart's Content is some little distance from here, and I should like to see Mr. Leigh at once.'

'That is my answer,' cried Darby.

As he spoke he sprang upon the usurer, and seized him by the throat; the old man struggled violently, but Darby bore him down until his back rested on the railing of the bridge and then he cast him over.

The usurer fell into the roaring torrent.

For a moment his body disappeared.

When it came to the surface Darby saw him strike out for the shore with a boldness which displayed the confidence of a good swimmer.

If he reached the bank he would be safe.

Darby could expect no mercy from him.

With the agility of a squirrel Darby vaulted over the end of the bridge on to dry ground.

A large stone, touched by his foot, caught his eye.*

He picked this up, and holding it in his hand he ran along the bank.

Jonas Bloxam was obliged to swim with the stream and was by this means carried some distance down, and prevented from landing.

Darby halted when he got opposite, and watched him with the eye of a lynx.

The old man was somewhat exhausted by swimming so far.

When he reached the bank, and his feet touched the bottom he gave vent to a sigh of relief.

Almost tottering along, he extended his hands to grasp the bough of a willow which protruded into the stream.

Darby leant forward, holding the stone in his hand.

He dealt him a murderous blow with it.

Uttering a subdued cry, the old man threw up his arms, and sinking back, was sucked into the current, and rapidly carried once more down the stream.

Darby, thinking him dead, ran back to the bridge, and retraced his steps to the castle as rapidly as possible.

'Where is her ladyship?' was his first question to a tall footman he met in the hall.

'Gone this half-hour, my lord,' was the reply.

'Gone! gone where?' asked Darby in dismay.

'Did not say, my lord; but Captain Scudamore took her away in his own carriage.'

Darby staggered against the wall.

Already the retribution of heaven was overtaking him.

The footman was alarmed at his ghastly pallor and haggard appearance.

'Shall I send for Dr. Mander, my lord?' he asked.

Darby's only reply was to fall back insensible, and the domestic, contriving to catch him, saved him from a severe injury, which his contact with the floor would have inflicted on him.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN AWFUL END.

DETECTIVE HAMLEY MORRIS, while looking out of the window at the 'Creek House,' saw a boat moored a little higher up the inlet.

His object was to overtake Daddy Chiverton and prevent his escape.

Telling the constable to guard the house during his absence, he hastily took his departure, and made his way down a narrow alley between two houses, to the spot where he had seen the boat.

It was a case in which he felt himself justified in disregarding the rights of property.

Jumping into the boat, he seized the sculls and rowed vigorously into the middle of the stream, after casting loose the painter.

Daddy Chiverton had now disappeared.

As he passed the 'Creek House,' the detective saw a score of faces at the window.

The bad characters upon this side of the creek sympathised with the fugitive.

To such an extent did they carry their sympathy that one had the hardihood to discharge a pistol at Hamley Morris.

Fortunately the aim was not correct.

The bullet whizzed over his head.

The next moment, aided by the tidal flow, he was carried behind some barges and was safe from further molestation of that sort.

The barges were six in number.

A faint light was shed upon them by some gas lamps in a yard to which they were attached, and where they would discharge their cargoes on the morrow.

This light was strengthened by the rays of the moon.

In passing the last barge of the six, which was laden with barrels containing paraffin oil, that dangerous and explosive

extract, Hamley Morris fancied he saw the shrinking form of a man hiding in the stern.

To make sure he sculled back a few yards, and distinctly saw the dripping garments and the flushed red face of Daddy Chiverton.

‘Oho! my friend,’ he said to himself; ‘you are there, eh? Wait a moment. It won’t do to hurry, but I think I have you.’ When alongside the barge he sprang on board, intending to make his boat fast, but the string slipped through his fingers, and the skiff was carried swiftly out of sight by the tide.

Uttering an exclamation of annoyance, Hamley Morris looked about him.

Finding that he was discovered, Daddy Chiverton looked over the side, as if contemplating another plunge into the creek.

Morris placed himself promptly between him and the water.

The tide having fallen, the barge was six feet or more from the level of the wharf.

This rendered it practically impossible for either of them to clamber up the side and so gain the land.

All at once Hamley Morris made a terrible discovery—he was unarmed.

In the haste of his departure from the Creek House he had left his pistol on the table.

Daddy Chiverton had nothing with which to defend himself except a long-bladed knife, keen as a razor. This he drew from his pocket, and opening it, stood on the defensive.

Hamley Morris drew near to him, and said—

‘Surrender quickly, and give me the confession of your son’s fraud, and no harm shall happen to you. I will undertake that you shall go where you like unmolested, and I will guarantee a sum of money for your future subsistence. If you resist I will have you dead or alive; if the latter, you will be tried for endeavouring to murder me on the high road to Stanton.’

‘You’ll get no confession from me,’ answered Chiverton.

‘In that case the law must take its course,’ said Hamley Morris, resolutely.

Daddy Chiverton endeavoured to place one cask on the top of another, so as to enable himself to reach the stone coping of the wharf overhead.

Morris, seeing his intention, sprang forward and pushed the cask away.

It fell on the deck, and the hoops bursting, the men were soon standing in a flood of paraffin.

Enraged at the failure of his stratagem, Daddy Chiverton ran at the detective with his long-bladed knife.

Morris retreated, having nothing to defend himself with, and cried loudly for help.

His foot slipped, and the next minute Chiverton was upon him, but he contrived to seize his hand, arresting the knife in its descent, and a terrible struggle ensued between them. While this was going on, the private watchman of the wharf, hearing the cries, hurried to the edge of the creek.

Looking down, lantern in hand, he saw the two men struggling together.

Hamley Morris did not cease to cry for assistance.

The waterman, who was a little active man, prepared to let himself down into the barge; but while he was endeavouring to do so, his lantern fell from his hand.

It dropped into the barge.

The door flew open, and it came in contact with a cask, the candle fell out, and the flame meeting the loose paraffin, a terrible explosion was the result.

The oil ignited, and instantly everything was in a blaze.

Hamley Morris and Daddy Chiverton were both terribly burned, and their dead bodies were found in the water some hours afterwards.

Fortunately for the watchman, he drew himself back when his lantern dropped from his hand, and so escaped the fate which would otherwise have been his.

Thus the secret perished with old Chiverton, and Hamley Morris fell a victim to his zeal, and died in a brave attempt to solve the mystery.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE IMPOSTOR UNMASKED.

IT was some time before the wretched impostor who was known as Lord Cariston recovered from the swoon into which the elopement of his wife had thrown him.

The blow, though not altogether unexpected, was very severe.

He missed the moral support which her presence had afforded him, and it would have been a consolation in his hour of trouble to know that somebody cared for him.

As it was, he felt himself alone in the world.

He had to battle with powerful enemies.

When he revived he was in a half-maudlin state, and called for brandy.

While under its fleeting influence he grew stronger, and conceived the idea that Mona had gone to Heart's Content.

He could not believe that she had left him entirely.

Ordering a carriage, he was driven there, and more than ever flushed and excited with drink, he asked permission to see Lady Cariston.

Ashley Leigh met him at the door, and was about to order him rudely away, when he saw the state he was in, but thinking that he had come to acknowledge his wicked usurpation of the title and estates, he beckoned him into the drawing-room.

'I wonder you have the impertinence to come here after what passed between us,' he said, 'on our last interview, but I presume you have a motive?'

'I have indeed,' answered Darby, crying like a child. 'My wife has gone away, and you have her hidden away from me, here.'

'Here! at Heart's Content?' said Ashley Leigh.

'Yes. I know it. Let me see her. I want only to speak to her, and I am sure she will come back again.'

'I can assure you that she is not in this house. We have seen nothing of her. If she has left you, you will not find her at Heart's Content.'

Lady Cariston now entered the room.

'Here is my mother. She can't deny she's my mother, because the old lord acknowledged me, and I've got the title,' said Darby, advancing with unsteady gait to meet her.

Seeing the condition he was in, her ladyship shrank away, muttering—

'Disgusting! What does the man want here?'

'He is under the impression that his wife has left him, and come here for shelter,' explained Ashley Leigh.

'Preposterous!' she said.

'I'll give you anything, if you'll let her come back to me. You want the lease of this house; I'll give it you. Mr. Ingledew shall not be turned out, I promise you that, only give me back Mona,' exclaimed Darby.

'That she should have left you is not at all surprising,' said Lady Cariston. 'I always said that Mona Seafield was designing and mercenary in the extreme. She married you for what she could get.'

'Where is she? Let me see her,' pleaded Darby, the tears streaming down his face.

'Is the man insane?' asked her ladyship.

Looking significantly at Lady Cariston, Ashley Leigh said to Darby—

'If, as you say, you are deserted by your wife, it is a sign that you are being punished for your crimes. Confess the injustice of which you have been guilty towards me, and which my unfortunate father so materially assisted by his easy credulity. I will forgive you, even promise that you shall not be punished, and that you shall be provided for.'

This proposal recalled Darby to himself.

It turned his ideas into another channel.

His suspicious mind was instantly on the alert.

'You don't catch a weasel asleep. I know that I have been drinking, but an old bird is not to be caught with chaff. She's my mother,' he pointed to Lady Cariston, 'that's right, isn't it?'

Ashley Leigh was silent.

'Of course it is. Very well. Then, if she's my mother I'm Lord Cariston and you're nobody. I am right enough.'

'You must be found out, sooner or later,' suggested Lady Cariston, taking her cue from Ashley.

'Later,' answered Darby, jokingly. 'Decidedly later. It ain't time yet. Don't you wish you may get it?'

‘There is nothing to be done with him,’ said Lady Cariston to Ashley, in a low tone.

‘I am afraid not. If he be tipsy he knows what he is about. I hoped to entrap him into some incautious admission, replied Ashley Leigh.

‘Of course, I saw your motive directly. Will it not be best to put an end to this absurd scene?’

‘I scarcely know.’

‘While Ashley Leigh was hesitating, a servant came in, saying, ‘A gentleman to see you, sir.’

‘Who is it?’ demanded Ashley.

‘He would not give his name, sir.’

‘Very well. I will come to him in one moment,’ said Ashley, adding to his mother, ‘Stay here with this fellow till my return. I shall only be in the passage; if he annoys you, call, and I will be with you instantly.’

Lady Cariston inclined her head in token of assent.

Darby’s head sank back upon the chair, and he looked half-stupidly out of his moist eyes at her ladyship, whose loathing and disgust were plainly visible on her eloquent and strikingly handsome countenance.

When Ashley Leigh reached the passage he saw an elderly man with a bandage tied round his head, who appeared in a very excited state.

‘Perhaps you don’t know me, squire?’ he cried. ‘I hardly know myself. But my name is Jonas Bloxam. I’ve narrowly escaped being murdered, first being thrown into the water, and then hit on the head with a big stone; fortunately the wound was not anything worse than a skin one, but if the villain had followed it up, I should never have lived to serve another writ, or issue another *capias*.’

‘Dear me, I am glad you escaped, Mr. Bloxam,’ answered Ashley Leigh. ‘I have known you for some time by name, and I must congratulate you upon a very narrow escape.’

‘You may well do that.’

‘Who is the miscreant, may I ask?’

‘You know him,’ answered the usurer, with a knowing look.

‘Indeed! I suppose you want a warrant. I am in the commission, as of course you are aware.’

‘No, I don’t want a warrant,’ replied Jonas. ‘If you and I can come to terms, I have a better revenge in store than all

the arrests in Christendom. I'll leave you to deal with the man.'

'Some enemy of yours, I presume,' said Ashley Leigh, seeming much puzzled.

The usurer's remarks had awakened his liveliest curiosity.

'Yes, he's an enemy, because he won't do the right thing by me, and I know too much for him. I swore I'd be the ruin of him, as I was climbing up the river bank, half-blinded with my own blood, and so I will. Jonas Bloxam never forgives when he's treated badly, as he has been this day.'

'What assistance can I render you?'

'Simply this. Help me to crush the usurper at the castle.'

At these words Ashleigh Leigh caught his hand in a hearty grasp.

'Make your own terms,' he said, eagerly.

'You know he's an impostor?' continued the usurer.

'Of that I never had a doubt.'

'But you want the proof.'

'I do,' answered Ashley Leigh.

'That I can give you.'

'You!' cried Ashley, delightedly.

'I,' answered Jonas, 'I have it, in his own handwriting, set down in black and white, a regular confession, which will send him to quarry stone for the rest of his life, at Portland.'

'Bless me, this is great news. You almost take my breath away,' exclaimed Ashley. 'I knew that my right would be established some day, but I did not think the time was so near.'

'You'll agree to my terms?' said the usurer.

'Name them.'

'They are; first, the money I've lent Darby Chiverton, with the interest I've thought fit to charge him; that must not be looked too closely into. Secondly, a present for myself, say five thousand. I'm sure that's moderate for helping you to get twenty thousand a year, and your rent-roll won't be far off that. Mind, you must not say where you got the confession from, unless it's absolutely necessary, as I don't want to be made an accessory.'

'Trust me, Mr. Bloxam, I will protect you in return for the service you are rendering me,' answered Ashley.

'You agree to my terms?'

'Unreservedly.'

‘Just put your name, then, to a bit of paper. Excuse me, but I like to have it all fair and above board. It’s so easy to forget, when the thing is settled and done with. Gratitude, you know, Mr. Leigh—my lord, I mean, beg pardon, I’m sure—is always a sense of favours to come, not of those received.’

Jonas Bloxam, when going home to change his wet clothes and get his wound bound up, thought of a bill stamp as a precautionary measure, and got one filled up ready for acceptance.

‘Come into the study,’ said Ashley.

The usurer followed him into Mr. Ingledeew’s *sanctum*. It was empty.

‘Now, Mr. Bloxam, show me the confession, and tell me how it came into your possession,’ said Ashley.

The usurer did so, and informed him how Darby had set fire to the house to get possession of the jewels, then ended by saying :

‘I will give you the confession and the jewels, and let you off for five-and-twenty thousand. Come now, that’s liberal.’

‘I will do nothing’ of the sort,’ answered Ashley ; ‘you must trust to my generosity. You know you have acted illegally, Mr. Bloxam. You also know that you are entirely in my power. I will take care that you lose nothing ; but your profits over this unfortunate and nefarious transaction shall not amount to the enormous sum you dream of.’

‘I know I have not been altogether just,’ answered the usurer, in a whispering voice. ‘But look to the risk I ran. It is not fair for you to take advantage of me like this. You are too hard upon me, my lord, indeed you are, more especially after agreeing to my terms.’

‘Cannot you be content to trust to my generosity ?’

‘If I must, I must ; but I’d rather have it done legally. I didn’t think you had the heart to rob an old man of his hard-earned gains.’

‘I repeat that you shall have no reason to be disappointed ; be satisfied with that, and put aside your bill stamp. I never broke my word yet, and I shall not begin to do so for the sake of cheating you out of your money, which you have amply earned by placing his paper in my hands.’

‘Give it me back again,’ exclaimed Jonas Bloxam, clutching at the precious document, which Ashley removed from his reach. ‘Give it back. I was a simpleton to part with it. I’ll

go home and think it over. We'd better meet to-morrow, Mr. Leigh—you are not my lord till it is all proved, you know.'

'You have gone too far to draw back, Mr. Bloxam.'

'No, I haven't. I will draw back. Give me the paper. It's a robbery. It wasn't true about the stolen goods—the jewellery, I mean. I wrote the paper myself. Give me the writing, Mr. Leigh.'

The wretched man trembled with an avaricious terror.

He thought he was going to lose all.

'Darby Chiverton is in this house now,' answered Ashley Leigh. 'Come with me and assist at his exposure, or I will denounce the pair of you. Do as I bid you, Mr. Bloxam. It is your only chance.'

'You won't be hard upon me, will you? Say now you won't be hard upon me,' pleaded the usurer.

'You have already received my promise to that effect, let that satisfy you; and now follow me to the drawing-room,' answered Ashley Leigh, whose white face and compressed lips showed his determination at once to unmask Darby's villany.

The usurer had no option but to obey.

They entered the drawing-room together.

Lady Cariston started when she saw the ghastly appearance presented by Jonas Bloxam, who hobbled in with the aid of a stick.

Darby was half asleep in the chair.

No conversation had taken place between him and her ladyship since Ashley had left the room.

Touching him lightly on the shoulder, Ashley Leigh exclaimed:

'Mr. Chiverton, here is the man whom you tried to murder.'

With a cry Darby looked up.

Jonas Bloxam stood before him.

'Begone!' he screamed, in a paroxysm of terror, thinking he saw a ghost. 'I did not do it! I wasn't—I—take him away—away—away!'

'The hemp's grown, and a murderer's grave yawns for you,' answered Jonas Bloxam.

The usurer enjoyed his fear, and took a pleasure in increasing it.

'Not dead!' gasped Darby, scarcely able to believe it.

'No. Providentially he has escaped from the fate you intended for him!' said Ashley Leigh.

Then he held up the incriminatory document; the sight of which showed the miserable impostor that his fraud was discovered and that his exposure was complete.

‘Here is the proof of your guilt. Your own confession, in your own handwriting, and signed by you!’ said Ashley Leigh.

Dropping out of the chair, Darby sank upon his knees, and clasping his hands abjectly together, begged for mercy.

‘It was not me. I was put up to it,’ he said in piteous accents; ‘it was she, my wife; she who’s run away from me; she who married me for the title and the money, Mona Seafield. She planned it, and came to our cottage when my mother was dying, and told my father and I what to do; and I wish I’d never seen her. Oh! Mr. Leigh. I’m very sorry. You won’t prosecute me? It was not my doing.’

‘Get up. It is to heaven that you should kneel for mercy, not to man!’ replied Ashley Leigh.

His contempt for the wretch was increased tenfold by this disgusting exhibition of cowardice.

‘I won’t move until you have given me your pardon, my lord, for you are the real lord; and now you’ve got your own again, you’ll let me go.’

‘Get out of my sight,’ replied Ashley Leigh, ‘and go where you like; but mind this, if you ever come within fifty miles of Hartshill Castle, and I hear of it, I’ll prosecute you as far as the law will let me. Be off at once, or I may repent my clemency, and reconsider my determination.’

Darby did not stay to hear this repeated.

He had sense enough to go at once to the castle, secure all the money and valuables he could lay his hands upon, and start, laden with the spoil, to London.

Ashley Leigh found no one to dispute his right to the title of Lord Cariston, for the usurper had fled, and every one hailed his re-appearance in his proper position with acclamation.

Although he did not comply with Jonas Bloxam’s exorbitant demands, he satisfied even his grasping character, and Lady Cariston had her jewels restored to her.

Nearly a year elapsed, in consequence of his father’s death, before he married Marian Ingledew.

As the castle had been prolific of disagreeable events, they resolved to spend a happy Christmas at Heart’s Content.

This they did.

A few of the friends of Marian’s girlhood and one or two college companions of Ashley’s were invited.

There was plenty of flirting, dancing, and kissing under the mistletoe, for it was a happy time with all.

The end of the conspirators was what might have been predicted from their lives.

Darby Chiverton, after pursuing a course of crime in London, was transported for life for committing a burglary under peculiarly desperate circumstances.

Mona was soon discarded by Captain Scudamore, and, left to her own resources in Paris, sank from one depth of degradation to another.

She came back to London with the husband of another woman, but swift retribution overtook her. When coming back from Richmond, where they had dined, the carriage was overturned by a coachman not more sober than his master and mistress. Mona was terribly injured about the head, and the man who had disgraced himself by an alliance with her led her faint and bleeding to a doctor's house.

It was night, and the street was deserted. The doctor came down, and ushering them in, did all that his skill suggested, but unhappily without any beneficial result.

Mona was fatally injured. She never recovered from the hurt she received and the shock to her constitution. After a lingering illness she died, unwept, and was buried in a nameless grave in an obscure part of a vast London cemetery.

Ashley Leigh, now Lord Cariston, became one of the most popular men in the county, a master of hounds, a member of parliament, and was, as a landlord, admired by all his tenants, nor was his wife a whit less liked than himself, for she was all gentleness and love to her fellow creatures.

In one another's society, and in the enjoyment of each other's love, they found that true Heart's Content, which, after much suffering, make up in pleasures so very sweet to those who spend a virtuous existence.





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